Germanic Words signifying the Means of Communication

Giichiro MAEJIMA

Heu, magister doctissime, qui nunc defunctus est!

The ancient Germanic peoples, regarded by the Greeks as one of the "Barbaroi" (stammerers) and called by the Slavs "Nemeć" (the Dumb ones), are known to have spoken Old Gmc dialects, a branch of the Indo-European language, in their daily communication. Up to c. 800-1000, the differentiation of these Gmc dialects was not so conspicuous as it is today, as is evidenced in the case of the English people and the Danish invaders in the Danelag, where the linguistic communication between the two was, as Jespersen suggested, possible: there are found epitaphs in Old English mixed with Danish words.\(^{(1)}\)

The linguistic situations about that time in the former Roman Provinces being nearly the same, there were current various but similar Gmc dialects in Northern Europe, and various Romance ones in Central and Southern Europe, with the ever receding Celtic. Nowadays, due to nationalisms, the histories of languages and literatures of modern European nations begin with the individual dialects and dialect literatures, but at least up to the year c. 1000, their respective independence was much less than now, and there surely existed much more mutual intelligibility among various peoples.

Moreover, the Gmc peoples shared myths, heroic legends, and literary themes during the Middle Ages: e. g. the tragedy of the Niflungs was

known even to the author(s) (scopas, or reciters) of *Beowulf*, and still, the hero of this epic was a Swede summoned to the rescue of the Danish crisis. There is a mention of the famous legendary smith named Welund there. *The Deor's Lament* contains allusions to Welund, *Eormanic*, Theodric of Verona, and some others of heroic renown.

When the Northmen first landed on Iceland ab. 860, they were surprised to find there some Irish "papar" (monks and anchorites), those *peregrinari pro Christo*, who however made away quickly, since they did not want to live in the neighborhood of the pagans: in this case there was perhaps no chance of communication between the two parties. There is a mention of Tyrkir the German among the crew of the Greenland expedition headed by Leif (*Grænlendinga Saga § 3*). King Olaf Tryggvason of Norway "had given Leif two Scots, a man named Haki, and a woman Hekja" who went on board Karlsefni's ship on his voyage to Vinland (*Hauksbók*)\(^{(2)}\): they were probably Celts who had been made slaves.

How were the intertribal communications carried on? It is hard to believe that the Vikings spoke with the Irish monks in Latin, still less in Irish. It is interesting to suppose various conversational situations developed themselves between these peoples of distant linguistic relationship. Though a work of Middle High German period, Gottfried von Strassburg interpolated, in his *Tristan und Isold*, in the original of the Tristan cycles of romances accumulated by Norman French troubadours such as Beroul and Thomas, a eulogy, in commending the ideal courtly Cornish hero Tristan, that, in addition to his bravery and musical talents, he was well versed in various languages then current in Northern Europe:

3690 'Tristan, ich horte dich doch e/britunsch singen und galois/guot latine und franzois/kanstu die sprache?' 'herre, ja/billiche wol.' nu kam iesa

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Laugesen\(^{(3)}\) tells us that it was not rare to find persons famed in their extraordinarily wide knowledge on languages not only in Romances (cf. *Aiol*, concerning a lady who knew 14 kinds of Lt), but also in real history (Bishop Hallr Teitsson +1150 spoke every language fluently throughout his pilgrimage to Rome; Markús Skeggjason, the skald, while young, knew languages of every kind). It is quite natural that Laugesen should be a little sceptical on such exaggerations, but anyway the knowledge of foreign languages and the role of a "tolk" (interpreter)\(^{(4)}\) were made much of even among the men of the early Middle Ages.

Germanic words signifying the primary language

"To speak and to hear"

It is of interest to find that the author of the *Prose Edda* was quite speech-conscious, and we find such kennings on language, esp. utterance, as the following: "Speech is called words, language, eloquence, talk, gibing, controversy, song, spell, recital, idle talk, babbling, din, chatter, squalling, merry noise, wrangling, mocking, quarreling, wish-wash, boasting, tittle-tattle, nonsense, idiom, vanity, gabbling. It is also termed voice, sound, resonance, articulation, wailing, shriek,

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\(^{(3)}\) A. T. Laugesen: *Om de germanske Folks Kendskab til Fransk sprog i middelalderen*, Copenhagen, Branner & Korch, 1951, p. 3.

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dash, crash, alarm, roaring, creaking, swoop, swooping, outburst."(5)
Cf. also the favorite OE set phrase 'wordhord onlēac' (he spoke), lit.,
he opened his treasury of words (Beowulf 259, Widsith 1, etc).

OE mapelian (G melden) is cognate with ON mál, which signified
'speech, eloquence, utterance, language, poem, legal case, etc.' Cf. also
Dan mål (language), Got maāl (gathering), and G Gemahl (husband:
wife, poet), the last of which has undergone a special sense develop-
ment, though already found in OHG, cf. ON māla (lady, poet).

"To speak" (G sprechen) and "speech" (G Sprache; Dan sprog is a
loanword from Plattdeutsch) are exclusively West Gmc, but are traced
back to Got usbrikan (break out), parallel to the Lt expression 'in
verba rumpere'. While G besprechen is sometimes found in magical
context, 'bespeak' is not.

"To utter" (G äussern), together with the G loan-translation 'Aus-
druck' (from Lt expressiō), signifies the enunciation of the speech sounds.

"To tell" (G erzählen) and "a tale" (G Erzählung, cf. Zahl), inclusive of
Dutch 'taal' (speech, language) originate from numbering and counting
topics while delivering a speech or a narrative. "To talk" is its variant.

OE cwepan, now remaining in the archaic 'quoth', constitutes the
base of the legal terms 'to bequeath' and 'a bequest'. This word is
found in all the branches of Gmc, and seems to be vaguely related
to Lt vetō, ar-biter, and Skt gāyati (he sings).(6)

"To name" (G nennen) and "a name" (G Name) have their corre-
spondences in Skt in the east, and in Old Irish in the west. OE hätan
(G heissen), the only medio-passive remnant in Modern English in the
form of 'hight', has a derivative noun 'behest', and is evidenced in
almost all Gmc languages.

(5) Skáldshaparmál § 72, F. Jónsson: Edda Snorra Sturlusonar, Co-
penhagen, Gyldendal, 1931, p. 192, cf. The Prose Edda, tr. by A. G.
Brodeur, N. Y., Amer.-Scand. Foundation, 1929, p. 239.
"To call" (from ON kalla) is not found in Got, but OE and OHG had its corresponding forms. It comes from IE *gar (as given in OED; better *gal- ‘to chatter’): Urslav gols’ (Russ gólos, a voice), Osset γαλας (a voice), cf. Sadnik-Aitzetmüller (op. cit., p. 236).

From IE *ghel- come words sometimes with magical connotation: Dan galdre (practise sorcery), gal (mad, ptc.) from ON gala (sing, ‘yell’; sing charms); ON galdra (song); OE gealdor and OHG galster (magical song). This root is contained in the bird-names, ‘nightingale’ and ‘staniel’.

As for similar sense-development, Falk-Torp (op. cit., s. v. gal) gives the following: a) enchantment by a song: ON gala; Gr ἐπιγενδὼ (I sing): ἐπιγενδὴ (sorcerer): ἐπιγενή (enchantment); Lt incantāre; incantātus (Fr enchanté); Lt carmen (song): Fr charme. b) enchantment by speech or cry: spell (sorcery): OE spell (narrative); G besprechen, beschreien; Gr βάσκω (I speak): βασκαίνω (I charm); Gr γός (sorcerer): γός (a cry); Lt farī (I speak): fascināre (to charm). ON syngwa (Got siggwan, to sing) was, in pre-Christian days, also the technical terminology of runic divination, most probably in alliterative forms.

"To say" (G sagen), together with its derivatives ‘gainsay’, G aussagen, entsagen, etc., is not found in Got, but is correlated with OLt in-sece (tell!), in-sectiones (narratives), and with Gr *sep, sekw-, as in Homeric ἐντέκυ (I say). (7)

The word ‘rún’ is contained in the G verb ‘raunen’ (arch. Eng. roun, round), ON rýna (inquire), and in G Alraune, originally ‘a female fairy’; also found as a component of personal names, as in ‘Gudrun’: for other personal names in -run, see (8). Cf. Finnish, ‘runo’ (poem), from Gmc.

G reden (and Rede), Got rapjo (a number, count), cf. Lt ratiō, δρατίσ.

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Note also the close relationship of the following expressions: counting (to tell, as in 'bank-teller'), utterance (to tell, G erzählen, reden) and thinking (to reckon, G rechnen). Cf. account, Fr (ra)contier, etc.

"To spell' and "a spell" (incantation), at first of the runic vocabulary, came to mean 'to tell the names of letters in a word', and the like. Got spill (fable, μίθος) is probably free from pagan connotations, so is OE godspel (good tidings, a loan-translation from Gr ἐυαγγέλιον).\(^9\)

OE þingian (reconcile), Eng. "a thing" (G Ding, cf. verteidigen, bedingen, dial. Dingsdag), and Scandinavian þing, ting (meeting) were originally legal terms. It was in July 1930 when the first millennium of the establishment of the Thing (Parliament) was celebrated in the field of Thingvellir in southwest Iceland.

OE sakan (to dispute), Got sakjō (a fight), ON sök, OHG sahha (a fight, legal case, occasion, thing, reason, estate) once belonged to legal terminologies. Now we find that the word 'sake' is limited to the collocation 'for the sake of someone', 'for someone's sake', etc., and that G Sache and Ursache belong to the general vocabulary.

As for the special manners of utterances, "to stammer" (G stammern; adj. Got stamms, ON stamr, cf. G Stimme, Gr στόμα {mouth}); "stutter" (G stottern, cf. G stossen); "whisper" (G wispern: from adj. (h)wis 'hoarse', G heiser), and G sich räusperm (clear the throat, cf. Gr ἐπεθύμωσε, spew out).

"To ask" (G heischen, with an inorganic h), according to Kluge (Etym. Wb.), can be traced to satem-languages.

"To answer" (G antworten) is derived from 'to swear' (G schwören), and the other Gmc forms are: ON svara and Got swaran (διδώσην): connected with Lt sermō, sors; Slav svar' (a fight), cf. further Feist (op. cit.) and Sadnik-Aitzetmüller (op. cit.).

"To hear" (G hören), together with Got ga-hausjan, refers back to IE *ous (ear). G gehorsam (OE gehiersum), with its verbal form G gehorchen, means 'obedient' and 'to obey'. G 'gehören' and 'gehörig' underwent intensive (Götze: Trübners deut. Wtbh.), or rather perfective-resultative semantic changes,\(^{10}\) as in Wulfilä's Luke 8: 8 and Mat. 11: 4. Even this intensive meaning was so faded already in MHG that 'gehören', 'gehörig'; 'behören', 'Behörde' and 'Zubehör' seem to have now no semantic tie with 'hören'. "To hearken, hark" (G (ge)horchen) contain an intensive affix -k- such as found in talk (: tell), lurk (: lower), and walk (: G wallen).

Germanic words signifying the secondary language

"To write and to read"

In most cases the Gmc expressions for the secondary language are characteristically connected with the runes. The practice of casting lots, collecting, and then divining them is evident from Tacitus' descriptions in his Germania (A. D. 98), Ch. x.

The invention of the runes was usually ascribed to Odin, as in the pathetically and philosophically beautiful poem Balder's Dream (Baldr's draumr § 3). Arntz,\(^{11}\) in quoting G. Dumézil's Mythes et dieux des germains (1939), believes in the etymological possibility of Gr 'οὐπαῦχος—Skt Varuṇa (*Wor-u-no)—Rune (Gmc *wr-u-na). We are not certain of this, but anyhow, the God's name (Wodan, Wotan, Odin) seems to be connected with the archaic Eng. adjective 'wood' (cf. G Wut, wūten), Lt vā-tēs, etc. Here also belong OE wōp (song, sound) and ON óðr (poetry), cf. OED.

The uses of the Runes

We know from various sources that the runes were at first the secret


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knowledge or practice of the hierarchy, and that women often played a very important part in the uses or practices of the runes, as is fascinatingly described by Dasent.\(^{(12)}\)

As for the various uses of the runes, Sigdrífu the Valkyrie gives a variety of advices, suggestive of the primitive forms of the runic practices:

_sigdrífunál:_

§ 4. Björ færík pér, 
bryñaígs apaldr, 
_magni_ blandinn 
ok megintiri, 
fullir's hann ljóða 
ok liknstafa, 
góðra galdra 
ok gamanrúna. 

4. Beer I prepare for thee, 
battle’s apple-tree (i.e. beer), 
blended with power 
and glory;

which is full of songs 
and mercy, 
good chantings 
and merry-tales.

§ 5. Sigrúnar skalt kunna, 
ef vilt sigr hafa, 
ok rístá á hjalti hjörs, 

sumar á véttrínum,\(^{(13)}\) 
sumar á valbóstum, 
ok nefna tysvar Tý. 

5. ‘Victory’-runes thou shalt know, 
if thou wantest to gain victory, 
and thou shalt carve (runes) on
the sword-hilt,
some on the lid-ridge,
some on the part of the sword, 
and call the name of Tiw twice.

§ 6. Ölrúnar skalt kunna, 
ef vilt annars kvæn 

6. ‘Ale’-runes thou shalt know, 
if thou dost not want another’s wife


(13) cf. B. Nerman: _The Poetic Edda in the Light of Archaeology_, Coventry, Viking Soc., 1931, p. 57. All the quotations from _The Poetic Edda_ are made from F. Jónsson’s ed.: _Sæmundar-Edda_. Reykjavík, Kristjánsson, 1926, 2nd ed.
vélit pik i tryggð, ef trúir;
á horni skal rista
ok á handarbaki
ok merkja á nagli Nauð.

§8. Bjargrúnar skalt kunna,
ef bjarga vilt
ok leysa kind frá konum,
á lófum skal rísta
ok of liðu spenna
ok biðja pá dísir duga.

§9. Brimrúnar skalt kunna,
ef vilt borgit hafa
á sundi segmörum, ...

§10. Limrúnar skalt kunna,
ef vilt læknir vesa...

§11. Málrúnar skalt kunna,
ef vilt at mangi þér
heiptum gjaldi harm, ...

§12. Hugrúnar skalt kunna,
ef vilt hverjum vesa
göðsvinnen guma...

§18. þat eru bókrúnar,
þat eru bjargrúnar
ok allar öldrúnar
ok mætar megínrúnar, ...

What is meant here is quite suggestive of the paganism and magic once current among the Gmc peoples a few centuries before the Christian era.

"The beech-tree—the writing material"

The tree-name "beech" is found in almost all IE dialects, though designating different trees from place to place. The runes were inscribed on beechen twigs or barks, on stones, rocks, horns, metal, or even on
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wax. G Buchstabe (OE rúnstæf) originally meant a runic letter inscribed on beech.\(^{(14)}\) It was after the introduction of Christianity that 'Buchstabe' came to mean the Latin alphabet. In Scandinavia, the Roman characters began to be used after 1050.\(^{(15)}\)

The runic alphabet, at first consisting of 24 letters, was widely used almost all over the Gmc areas about 100 B.C. (Arntz: op. cit., p. 183). Throughout its long history, it suffered many cultural and semantic changes, but the original Gmc uses of the runes are evident from various Edda passages, those from Classical authors, from Venantius Fortunatus in the sixth century, and even from Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* (c. 1200). In Saxo (I, Preface, p. 7) there is a mention of a rock in Blekinge with runic inscriptions, and of Waldemar's attempt to interpret them, where Saxo uses the word "virgulae" (rune-twigs). His passages concerning Amlethus (Hamlet, I, p. 81) is well-known: Hamlet was sent over to England by his treacherous uncle to bring the "letters inscribed in wood" (literas ligno insculptas)—a letter asking for the murder of the bearer. Notice Saxo's commentary: "it was a kind of writing material often used in old times" (id celebre quondam genus chartarum erat).

"Book vs. Beech"

First we have to consider whether these two words were of the same origin. According to *OED*,

The original meaning of the word 'Book' was evidently 'writing-tablet, leaf, or sheet'; cf. Venantius Fortunatus *Carm.* vii, 18, 19 'barbara fraxineis pingatur runa tabellis', also OS *thia bok*, the writing-tablet, ...OE bōc 'charter'; in pl. written sheets, hence 'book', a sense subseq. extended to the singular. Got does not show *bōks*, but an apparently derivative form bōka

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\(14\) Rune-stave: "a Runic letter, or symbol"; Rune-staff: "a magic wand inscribed with runes; a runic calendar or clog-calendar" (*OED*).

strong fem., in sense of 'letter' of the alphabet, pl. bōkōs litterae, γράμματα, writing, document, book. Generally thought to be etymologically connected with the beech-tree, OE bóc, bêce, ON bók: ...the suggestion being that inscriptions were first made on beech tablets, or cut in the bark of beech-trees; but there are great difficulties in reconciling the early forms of the two words, seeing that bōk-s 'writing-tablet' is the most primitive of all.

According to J. Grimm (Deut. Wtbh., s. v. Buchstabe), it was originally a small beechen wood used for lot, each with inscribed symbols. J. Hoops (Realelexikon d. gm. Altertumskunde, I, p. 349f.), on the contrary, supposed that it was written not with the runes, but with the Lt alphabet. Old Church Slavonic has buky (buk'vi) 'a letter', on which Saidnik-Aitzetmüller (op. cit., p. 219) expressly says:

Zweifellos ist Zusammenhang mit dem Buchennamen buk' (russ. bg. poln., etc. buk) und germ. Herkunft wie bei diesem. Als Quelle kommt am nächsten ein vorgot. *bōkō, got. bōka 'Bouchstabe', Pl. bōkōs 'Buch, Brief, Urkunde'.

Feist (op. cit.) also believes in the identity of the two words, 'book' and 'beech'. In conclusion, it may safely be said that these two words are ultimately identical, though there are some difficulties in proving the missing link between them.

It was Gothic that first took a turn to Classical alphabet in c. 200 A. D.,(16) while the other Gmc languages retained the runic alphabet much longer. The Scandinavian conversion to Christianity in c. 1000 caused the gradual decline and fall of the runic, and the following contrasts show the older and younger stages:

Runic......ON bókrúnar (Sigrdrifumál § 19), rūnastáfr (OE rúnstæf), rūnamál
Latin......ON bókstáfr (cf. OE bōcstæf, OHG böbstab 'Buchstabe'), bókmál

Another appellation of the writing material is: ON keflí, kaflí (a stick), cf. MHG kavelen (to cast lots): Holthausen(17) gives corresponding

(16) V. Dahlerup: Det danske sprogs historie, Copenhagen, Schultz, 1921, 2nd ed., p. 4.
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Lithuanian forms. Similar cultural opposition is found in:
- Runic...ON (rūna-)kefl (a round piece of wood)
- Latin...ON speld, spiald (a tablet)

It must be noted that the word 'rūn' itself, though rarely, is sometimes applied to Roman alphabet (Cleasby-Vigfússon-Craigie: op. cit., s. v. 'rūn').

"To write and to read"

There are several words expressing the action of inscribing (or painting) the runes. "To write" (G (ein-)ritzen, reissen), cf. Got writs (Strich, kse:pai:a), though found only once in Wulfila. Instead, Germans use 'schreiben' (from Lt), which is also found in Icelandic since 1000. With the advance of Christianity, 'to write', originally of the runic vocabulary, came to mean the writing of the Latin alphabet, or any action of writing whatsoever.

ON rīsta (or rista, MHG risten 'to carve, scratch') has, according to Holthausen (op. cit.), its correspondences in Skt and Avestan. ON rīta (from OE), on the contrary, always meant writing on parchment.

ON fá (paint), found so often in its preterite form 'fahioo' in Urnordic inscriptions, is from IE *peik, cf. OE fegan, OHG fēhen, Lt pingere, Toch pik, etc.

ON mālan (from MLG, cf. OE mǣlan) has many IE correspondences. It is generally supposed that painting (such as that of Altamira cave in Spain) went before carving.

ON rīsa (redden), with blood, cf. Egils Saga, where blood meant magical power. Painting with red-lead (vermilion, OHG zoubar: ON taufr 'amulet') signified magic (G Zauber), cf. Kluge (op. cit.)

Other verbs signifying writing are: ON höggva (to hew), merkja (to mark, cf. Beowulf 1695), skafa (to scrape), and yrkja (to 'work', cut). As for the preterite form 'tawido' ('made', in as the Gold Horn of Gallehus), cf. Got taujan (to do, work).

The Poetic Edda is rich in the verbs expressing the act of writing:
Völuspá § 19. þaðan koma meyjar
margs vitandi
þar őr þeim sæ,
es und þoll stendr;
(Urð hétu eina,
aðra Verandi,
skera
skáru á skíði,
Skuld hina þriðju)
þær lög lögðu,
þær líf köru,
alta bórnun,
örlög seggja.

Hávamál § 142. Rúnar munt þú finna
ok ráðna stafi
mjök stóra stafi,
jmök stína stafi,
fá
es fáði fimbulpulr
góra
ok gerðu ginnregin
ok reist hropt röagna....
frísta § 144. Veíztu, hvé frísta skal?
Veíztu, hvé ráða skal?
fá
Veíztu, hvé fáa skal?
Veíztu, hvé freista skal?
Veíztu, hvé biðja skal?
Veíztu, hvé blóta skal?
Veíztu, hvé senda skal?
Veíztu, hvé sóa skal?
[Von dort kommen Mädchen,
mancherlei wissend,
drei, aus dem Wasser,
das unter dem Baume steht (dem Urdsquell);]
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(Urd nannte man die eine,
die andere Werdandi...
sie schnitten (Zeichen?) aus das Holzscheit (Losstäbe?)...
Skuld die dritte;)
sie legten die Geschicke fest,
sie wählten das Leben
des Menschenkindern,
Schicksale der Männer. (F. Rank's tr.)
Runes thou canst find
and a counsel-giving stave,
a very great stave,
a very large stave,
which the very wise man made
and magna numina made
and Thor (among the Gods) raised.
Dost thou know how to carve?
Dost thou know how to advise?
Dost thou know how to paint?
Dost thou know how to try (thy) prowess?
Dost thou know how to pray?
Dost thou know how to worship?
Dost thou know how to send?
Dost thou know how to sacrifice?"

"To read" (G raten, Rat) also belonged to the runic vocabulary.
Lots inscribed with runes were scattered, taken up (Hávamál § 139;
Lt tollère), collected (G lesen, Lt légere), and then 'read' (advise, cf.
Hávamál § 144, above), interpreted or divined (G er-, be-raten).

Got gakunnan sik (sich unterordnen, gehorchen, ἐποιήσασθαι) and
ufkunnan (erkennen, γνώσεως) are supposed to have originally be-
longed to the runic vocabulary.
Most of the words treated of here are commonplace ones, and have undergone quite phantastic semantic changes. It is of interest to find out the hidden meaning and cultural background, and, as I firmly believe, one of the charms of philology — into which the late Professor Shimmura initiated us — may lie herein. (Tokyo, May, 1968)