

## What are etymological (and etymographical) units made of: Vocables or lexemes?

Etymological dictionaries are typically defined as “DICTIONAR[IES] in which words are traced back to their earliest appropriate forms and meanings” (Hartmann & James 1998 s.v.). The element *word* in such definitions, although intuitively comprehensible, lacks technical rigour, and is therefore ambiguous. Consequently we will use instead the threefold terminology (as well as the typographical conventions attached to it) established within the theoretical framework of Meaning-text theory (see Mel’čuk 2012: 21-44): *wordform* (defined as ‘segmental linguistic sign that is autonomous and minimal, i.e., that is not made up of other wordforms’), *lexeme* (‘set of wordforms, and phrases, that are all inflectional variants’), and *vocable* (‘set of lexical units –lexemes or idioms– whose signifiers are identical, whose signifieds display a significant intersection, and whose syntactics are sufficiently similar’).

We find this terminology particularly useful for etymological and etymographical purposes: first because it is coherently based on Saussure’s definition of linguistic signs and secondly because it reserves a term (*lexeme*) for the central unit ‘one signifier, one signified, all inflectional variants’ of a polysemous vocable, which in most terminologies is not explicitly named (mostly, there is talk about “words” developing new “senses”, but sense only refers to the signified and not to the combination of the signifier, the signified, and the syntactics). Thus, for example, the vocable TABLE contains lexemes like TABLE1 ‘article of furniture consisting of a flat top and legs’, TABLE2 ‘arrangement of items in a compact form’, and TABLE3 ‘upper flat surface of a cut precious stone’, which in turn present the wordforms table and tables.

In general, dictionary entries are made up of vocables like TABLE. For this reason, one could be tempted to state that etymological and etymographical units are made of vocables. Indeed, most etymological dictionaries implicitly proceed as if this were the case –without, however, discussing this option, for instance in their prefaces.

This paper advocates a contrario that individual lexemes and not whole vocables are best hypostatized as etymological and etymographical units. This approach will be illustrated by various examples.

### CITED WORK

Hartmann, R. R. K. & James, Gregory (1998): *Dictionary of lexicography*. London/New York: Routledge.

Mel’čuk, Igor’ A. (2012): *Semantics: From meaning to text*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins.