

Planting sense and wearing planets:

From *pisciculus* to *poeticus* at the Thesaurus Linguae Latinae 2002-03

Pisciculus means “little fish” from its earliest use in Roman comedy until Tertulian, where it can mean “follower of Christ,” as it were the “big fish,” *Bapt. 1: nos pisciculi secundum ἰχθύον nostrum Iesu Christum in aqua nascimur nec aliter quam in aqua permanendo salvi sumus*. But in Petronius the word had already been used in a simile to refer to students of rhetoric as “bitsy fishes” before the baited hooks of a talented teacher, 3.4: *eloquentiae magister ... tamquam piscator eam imposuerit hamis escam, quam scierit appetituros esse pisciculos*, and according to Suetonius, the emperor Tiberius used *pisciculus* in a transferred sense to refer to his younger swimming mates, *Suet. Tib. 44.1: quasi pueros primae teneritudinis, quos ‘pisciculos’ vocabat, institueret ut natanti sibi inter femina versarentur*. So Tiberius becomes our first source in the history of the Latin language for *pisciculus* in reference to people, but in the chronology of our article for the TLL the Suetonius passage follows Petronius and is itself followed by Tertulian.

Chronological quibbles aside, there are few difficulties with the semantic arrangement of an article on *pisciculus*, a word with some thirty-five instances in the Latin language from Terence to Jordanes the Goth (*fl.* 550 CE). It divides neatly into two parts: the first deals with the literal usage, the second with its use in a figurative or transferred sense. In the argot of the Thesaurus this is expressed as **1. proprie** and **2. in imagine vel translate**. For those unacquainted with the TLL, this bipartite scheme adheres nicely to the fundamental structuring principle behind the ideal Thesaurus article: the principle of dichotomy. A dichotomic division is never a fast rule at the TLL, rather a practical guide that can provide structure to a potentially chaotic mass of passages spanning, as in the present case, over 700 years in the language of drama, religion, law, philosophy, medicine, cooking, graffiti, and Getic history. But the vagaries of language are not always amenable to the lexicographer’s schemes, and a year in Munich will teach that a truly successful Thesaurus article depends less on a convenient dichotomy than on an uncompromising awareness of a word’s “life history,” or *Lebensgeschichte* in the formulation of the Swiss Latinist and lexicographer and father of the TLL, Eduard Wölfflin.

Wölfflin’s interest in late nineteenth-century biological theory, which posited an inherent dichotomy in nature, is said to have led him to develop the first unofficial tenet of the Thesaurus method still in use today: for each main grouping allow there to be a corresponding one in opposition. In actual practice, however, Wölfflin’s experience with language taught him that each word has its own unique history and that the successful lexicographer has to be a shrewd observer, sensitive to both general tendencies and random irregularities. The generous support of the APA and the National Endowment for the Humanities made it possible for me to apply Wölfflin’s techniques to the practice of lexicography as an academic fellow at the TLL from July 2002 to June 2003. In addition to *pisciculus*, I wrote there entries for *planto*, *planctus*, *planeta* (and its relatives *planetes* and *planon*), *plaudo*, *pluma* (and its derivatives *plumarius*, *plumiger*, *plumosus* etc.), and *poeticus*. In what follows I present some problems – in particular with *planto* and *planeta* – from this trial-by-fire introduction to Latin lexicography, an introduction that was never dull, always challenging, and an invaluable learning experience that has made me a better scholar.

Because of the importance of the cultivation of the land among Rome’s earlier writers such as Cato and Varro, I was surprised not to find the verb *planto* before the first century of the

common era. It first appears in Latin literature in the tenth book of Columella's *de re rustica*, which is not so remarkable except that the tenth is the last book, is written in verse, and after Columella there are only rare instances of *planto* in poetry. The first real problems for the definer of *planto* occur in the Latin versions of the Old Testament and the myriad patristic texts dependent on them. In some pre-Vulgate translations – collectively referred to as the *Vetus Latina* – the verb is used figuratively in reference to God's care of the people of Israel, Vet. Lat. *exod.* 15.17: *induc et planta eos in montem hereditatis tuae* “lead them and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance.” This looks ahead to similar passages in the Church fathers, notably Ambrose in *psalm.* 43.11.4: *petens ut induceret dominus populum suum in illa praecelsae virtutis sapientiaeque plantaria ibique plantaretur in opera sua* “asking the Lord to lead his people into the plantings of his exceeding virtue and wisdom and to plant them there in his handiwork.” Here, the image of the planter at work on the land (*in imagine*) is still important, and we have to wait for the poetry of the psalms to see *planto* being used in a transferred sense outside the context of land-cultivation (*translate*), Vet. Lat. *psalm.* 93.3 *qui plantavit aurem non audit?* “He who fashioned the ear does not hear?” Again, Ambrose takes note and turns a similar phrase, *Iac.* 1.1.4: *deus hominem constitueret et in eo mores sensusque plantaret* “God made man and in him planted character and sense.” There is little in the *Lebensgeschichte* of *planto*, however, to prepare the lexicographer for the medical writer Cassius Felix (*fl.* 450 CE), 46 p. 120: *utendum ... aquis calidis naturali calore plantatis, nam Graeci autofye idata vocant* “use warm water endowed with a natural heat, or what the Greeks call ‘natural waters’.” As the gloss suggests, the passage depends on a Greek source, probably Galen, where Cassius may have confused φύω “to bring forth, grow, be born” with φυτεύω “to plant.”

Planeta is the latinized form of the Greek word for “wandering.” Most often, it refers to the planets, which were thought to wander through the heavens. The Latin authors called them simply *stellae errantes* until the Palatine librarian Hyginus (Ovid's contemporary), who names five canonical *planetae*: *Saturnus Iuppiter Mars Venus Mercurius*, and is followed in this by Firmicius Maternus (4th cent.) and Favonius Eulogius (5th cent.). Ausonius, Servius, and Boethius add the sun and moon to make seven, but most authors make no mention of number. The Latin translators of the Greek medical writings of Hippocrates and Soranus continue to refer to a fever as *planeta* or “wandering humor.” Finally, in Isidore and the sixth-century life of St. Fulgentius, Bishop of Ruspe, *planeta* refers to a type of liturgical robe, so named either because the outer hem wandered about the priest's body or because it was well suited for a journey. Whatever the origin, the meaning stuck: what we know as “chasuble” in English is still called “*pianeta*” in Italian today.

With its substantial library, archive and some 25 full- and part-time workers, the Thesaurus is the largest institution in the *Bayrische Akademie der Wissenschaften*, housed in the former residency of Bavarian kings in the center of Munich. The library, perhaps more impressive for the focus of its selection than for its size, offers an ideal working environment to the Latin philologist. Unlike most classical libraries, which are arranged alphabetically, the TLL's library is set up in chronological order. Every book-spine is labeled with numbers that correspond to the authors from the fragmentary Latin poets (1) through Cicero (10), Vergil (19) and the Latin grammarians (65) to Ausonius (120), Pseudo-Primas (151a), Isidore (222) and the post-classical *glossae* and *notae tironianae* (225). To the sweep of the eye the library offers a vivid mental image of over 800 years of the Latin language and its literature. The archive is said to contain some ten million 5 x 7" slips with ditto-machine copies of hand-written passages in which a single word is underlined in red. This word is the so-called lemma or entry-word for the

dictionary. Each lemma is arranged chronologically by author in a filing box (or boxes depending on the lemma [a word such as “*qui*” might have over 10 boxes]), and the boxes are arranged alphabetically by lemma on the archive’s shelves. The slips contain all of Latin literature through Apuleius, and everything thereafter until 600 CE (literary works, commentaries, legal texts, inscriptions *etc.*) is excerpted. Some authors such as Jerome and Augustine are more fully excerpted than others, and many concordances have become available since the first batch of slips was compiled at the end of the 19th century.

The Thesaurus is a very special place for so many reasons, not least among them the outstanding scholars you get to work with on a daily basis. I will go back, hopefully soon, as they say in Bavarian, “so schee, scho aa.”

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