

ENGLISH DAVIT/OLD FRENCH DAVIET AND MODERN FRENCH DAVIER:
A BIBLICAL ECHO IN MEDIEVAL SAILORS' SPEECH (WITH REMARKS ON
SEMANTIC AND PHONOLOGICAL THEORY).

Abstract:

The authorities explain English davit/OF daviet 'davit' as the OF proper name Davi 'David' plus diminutive -et, with the note that other tools and machines were also given proper names. True as the latter observation may be, it only obscures the question why the device referred to was given this particular proper name. Why precisely 'little David' for crane, and not some other name? The ancient mariners who chose the name had a very concrete motivation. The diminutive suffix suggests that the David here alluded to was David, not as the great king, but as the little champion who slew Goliath with his stone. The OF daviet, like its phonologically conservative English borrowing davit, aptly names a crane, since no less than the little Old Testament hero, this instrument is a "port-élingue", i.e. 'holds a sling'. (Semantics, contexts, cultural anthropology, generative phonology, derivational morphology, lexicology, etymology, French, English.)

1. The etymology. Daviet 'davit' is conventionally explained as the proper name Davi 'David' plus the diminutive suffix -et; names of tools, the authorities add, often are given proper names. This principle is true enough, and it provides a general framework for problems

of this general nature: the theoretical connection between names of persons and instruments is evident, e.g. in English derivatives in -er: They are both agentive and instrumental. This would explain the one shared feature, but does not clarify the choice of Davi itself. Why 'little David' for a kind of crane, and not some other name? The ancient mariners who coined this one had, I propose, a very concrete motivation in the inventory of traditional heroes of their Judaeo-Christian culture.

The morphology suggests that the figure we seek was indeed small. This excludes the great king David, but not the same personage as the boy who slew the giant Goliath with his stone. Daviet (and the phonologically more conservative English borrowing davit) names a crane, especially a crane mounted on ships' gunwales. Such an instrument is a little David, because, like him, it 'holds a sling'. It is thus an encoding equivalent to *porte-élingue*¹ and has an exact parallel in the name of the book that 'holds the world,' an Atlas. (Another marine term that ought to dispel any doubt about sailors' knowledge of Biblical motifs is Jacob's ladder.)

2. Modern French davier, generative phonology, and semantics. OF daviet has been reinterpreted in underlying semantics as davier. This new form (since Rabelais) poses interesting questions, not only for etymology, but also for generative phonology and semantic theory in general.² Generative grammarians have dogmatized a most ingenuous principle, that change in language is largely restricted to surface

levels, and that 'underlying representations are remarkably stable.' The orthographic change evident in Old French daviet and modern French davier is most straightforwardly interpreted to mean that the suffix of the OF daviet had not only undergone phonetic syncretism with the instrument/agent/functionary/class member suffix -ier but also that a semantic reading of the diminutive suffix as such was no longer possible, for reasons gone into immediately. The orthographic change can be understood only if we assume that not only the surface, but also the deeper conceptualization of this lexical item changed.

Three facts, one social, one paradigmatic, one syntagmatic, explain why OF daviet was morphologically/semantically, hence orthographically, reinterpreted as something other than a diminutive in -et: (1) The sweeping replacement by etymologically proper David for the popular Romance form Davi, which is seen not only in OF, but in e.g. Old Spanish Davi-huelo and Davi-guelo (private communication of Yakov Malkiel), and (via OF) in the English onomasticon: the nickname Davey, the surname Davy, Davis (=Davi's/son, or hired man) and its patronymic Davison (= 'Davi's son' and Davi's son). (2) The absence of a feminine counterpart in -ette to daviet made it impossible for speakers to recognize this as unambiguously a diminutive. (Do poor spellers often do this in French?--E.g. do they write archer for archet 'bow' [musical instrument]?) (3) The desuetude of liaison except for special set phrases and for high style conspired to give daviet only one invariant phonetic realization, viz. /davjɛl/.

These three principles led to a result where the underlying phonological form for this word is the same as the surface form.

"Abstract" underlying forms (UFO's) are valid only insofar as they are abstractions, in the sense of generalizations, of real phonetic variants. Therefore, isolated forms by definition cannot have abstract UFO's. So much for the phonology.

As for the semantics, there is a problem in the extension of this name davier to the forceps and 'wrench' (US)/'spanner' (GB), besides the points already mentioned. One must respect chronology and Sachwandel: it seems the first tool so designated was the 18th century dentist's forceps. The only immediate morphosemantic connections one can now envision are: the feature [+instrument], for the suffix -ier here, the possibility of a visual equation of the curve of the davit's arm and that of the dentist's tool, and a functional fact: the dentist's forceps is an instrument for extracting, and Falconer 1769 (v. OED s.v. davit) writes: "The davit...is employed to fish the anchor". In any event both instruments engage, grapple with, and raise objects that are either heavy or rooted.

In the Encyclopédie Diderot (sub, v. davier) we glimpse this: "L'extrémité antérieure qui fait le bec de la pincette, ressemble à un bec de perroquet...la [machoir] supérieure...est...beaucoup plus courbée que l'inférieure...". The same courbure is again mentioned in the ensuing description. Given this configuration, I posit a recent re-etymologization of old daviet as x = -ier 'instrument/agent/exemplar', where dav- has the same value as the unclear first members (for speakers) of English walnut or cobweb. The very inconclusiveness of this semantic explanation of the shift from daviet to davier signals the

justification of the concrete classical ("taxonomic") phoneme. "Systematic phonemes," valid and necessary for felt derivatives of productive processes and the overall sound pattern of a language, falsify speakers' intuitions regarding unetymologizable words.

3. T. G. grammar in the light of onomastics and etymology in general. Transformational-generative grammar has contributed more explicit notational devices for the use of linguists, but older disciplines, such as onomastics and etymology, badly neglected in the United States, have something to teach both the resuscitators of semantics and phonological theorists. That message is that a classical phonemic level ("alphabetic phonemic level," as I prefer) is the only construct where-with linguists can represent unetymologizable words in the lexicon. This by no means precludes our acceptance of "systematic phonemes," but these are psychologically valid only when restricted to the representation of productive morphonemic processes, or to delineate the over-all sound pattern of a language. When pushed to include every last retrievable bit of phonic patterning in morphemes, no matter how unproductive or how unfelt by speakers, "systematic phonemes" falsify the facts. A dialectical resolution of the debate of the post-Bloomfieldian and Chomskyan sectarians ("once a phoneme always a phoneme" vs. "the phoneme is dead") is that the logically "opposing" notions of alphabetic and systematic phonemes are not exclusive, but complementary. (Anttila 1972 argues similarly.) Just as in the ancient debates on nomos and physis, analogy and anomaly, the resolution lies in seeing these exclusive choices, but empirically complementary, if

logically opposite, characteristics inherent in a single entity. Note Krohn's "contradictory feature specification" (1971) e.g. of diphthongal an, ay as [flow] and [+high] (in sequence).

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NOTES

1. French élingue OF eslingue, a borrowing of OHG slings 'sling,' is now specialized to mean a dockside hoisting sling. It is probable that the particular sling in the minds of the witty dockers who put davit in circulation was the loop of rope mounted in bow and stern of a small boat; when the boat is lowered or raised, the davit engages the permanently mounted sling.

2. A refashioned by-form davidet names a coopers' tool for assembling the bottom of barrels, called David by Seventeenth Century English joiners.

REFERENCES

- Anttila R., Introduction to Historical Comparative Linguistics. London and New York: Macmillan, 1972.
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