

# Like '*fire*' and '*water*'

: About a Rather Unexpected Onomasiological Relationship

Matthias Voth\*

We twa hae paidl'd in the *burn*,  
Frae morning sun till dine;  
But seas between us braid hae roar'd  
Sin' auld lang syne<sup>1</sup>.

In a paper on the principles of etymological research in the Indo-European languages, Oswald Szemerényi, rejecting a possible etymological connection between Latin *torrens*, *torrentis* "a brook in the mountains, a torrent" (hence the English "torrential downpours, torrential rains" etc.) and the verb Latin *torrere*, *torreo* "to dry; to fry; to bake; to burn; to blaze up (in passion)" states that "a rushing stream, however rapid it be, cannot burn...". Even though it was quite commonly accepted to interpret *torrens* as "a brook which falls dry in summer", he didn't find any evidence of a usage of *torreo* as "to fall dry". He subsequently interpreted *torrens* as a present participle of an undocumented verb *\*tonereo* "to thunder", the participle of which became *\*tonrens* and subsequently was simplified to

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\* Professor, Faculty of Humanities, Fukuoka University

<sup>1</sup> Burns, Robert: Auld lang syne.

*torrens* "the thundering one", an interpretation he also offers for the Gaulish hydronym *Tanaros*<sup>2</sup>.

Szemerényi's statement reflects a widely held belief that there could hardly exist two more different, even antagonistic, phenomena than 'fire' and 'water'. In the *The two gentlemen of Verona*, Shakespeare has one of the protagonists, Julia, protest that

*Thou wouldst as soon go kindle fire with snow  
as seek to quench the fire of love with words*<sup>3</sup>.

In sonnet 154, 14 he says

*love's fire heats water, water cools not love.*

And in King Richard II. he has Boling proclaim:

*Methinks King Richard and myself should meet  
With no less terror than the elements  
Of fire and water, when their thundering shock  
At meeting tears the cloudy cheeks of heaven*<sup>4</sup>.

In German this antagonism is reflected in proverbs like "*Feuer verzehrt, Wasser ernährt*" (fire devours, water feeds), "*Wasser und Feuer werden nicht Freunde*" (fire and water will never become friends), "*Kein Feuer so heiß, ein Wasser kann es löschen*" (no fire so hot water can quench it)<sup>5</sup>. In a

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<sup>2</sup> Szemerényi, Oswald: *Principals of Etymological Research in the Indo-European languages*. In: Schmidt, R. (editor), *Etymologie. Wege der Forschung* vol. CCCLXXIII. Darmstadt 1977, p. 334.

<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare, William: *The two gentlemen of Verona*. Act II, Scene vii, 19.

<sup>4</sup> King Richard II., Act 3, scene 3, 58.

<sup>5</sup> All German proverbs quoted from: Beyer, Horst & Annelies: *Sprichwörterlexikon*. Munich 1985.

sequel of the TV series "Hercule Poirot", in the happy ending, the heroine Stella suggests to her male counterpart "*let's mix fire and water and get married!*"<sup>6</sup> to stress the fact that the marriage of two so different characters would mean making the impossible possible. To that same end she might as well have used the term "*let's mix oil and water and get married!*". So in popular perception, *fire* and *water* form the ultimate opposite, and it would thus be inconceivable that the one phenomenon be described by means of the other except as an opposite. Szemerényi's statement is undoubtedly correct. Or is it?

It remains to be seen whether the statement of a 20th century speaker of one or more languages is valid, when it comes to the conceptual arrangement of the world<sup>7</sup> by prehistoric humans. Maybe the concepts of 'burning' and some 'water phenomena' were expressed by the same word, i.e., the same lexeme was used to denote both phenomena. No 21st century speaker, unless in a state of hallucination or poetic ecstasy, would describe the sea as "coloured like wine"<sup>8</sup>, yet in the 8th century B.C. this is exactly the recurring *epitheton ornans* Homer uses in the *Odyssey* to describe the Mediterranean: *πλέων ἐπι οἶνοπα πόντον ἔπ' ἀλλοθρόους ἀνθρώπους* "*faring the wine coloured sea to the lands of peoples talking in strange tongues.*"<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Christie, Agatha: *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (1995)

cf. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110014/plotsummary>.

<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt's *Sprachliche Zwischenwelt*, i.e. the language filter through which we perceive our environment.

<sup>8</sup> i.e. *red wine*.

<sup>9</sup> Ὀδύσσειας A, 182-183 In: *Homeri Opera. Recognovit brevis adnotatione critica instruxit Thomas W. Allen*. 2nd Edition 1917. Reprinted 1962.

Of course it can be argued that the spectrum of light is a continuum from the very short lightwaves (ultraviolet) to the very long ones (infrared), and that each

Émile Benveniste in his paper "Semantische Probleme der Rekonstruktion"<sup>10</sup> (*Problems in semantic reconstruction*) points out that in general the criteria applied to *formal reconstruction* of linguistic items can be very precisely and strictly applied, because they have been derived from very stringent phonetic and morphological rules. In contrast, the problem with *semantic reconstruction* is that there are no such exact criteria, the guideline "*being a certain probability based on common sense and the linguist's personal judgment and the ability to quote a few parallel cases of naming a phenomenon*". The problem being... "*whether and in what way two formally identical or comparable morphemes can be identified by means of their meaning*"<sup>11</sup>. The "*meaning*" of a linguistic entity is defined by the totality of its usage, its distribution and the types of combinations which result from it, i.e. Leonard Bloomfield's famous "*meaning is use*". If the researcher is confronted with two formally identical lexemes representing different meanings, they have to investigate whether there exists a usage in which the two regain their unity<sup>12</sup>. In other words, the question arises whether there exists a *tertium comparationis*, linking these lexical items.

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language in space as well as in time divides this continuum into different colour-terms. So "*οἶνοψ*" might have denoted something like "dark". Homer didn't choose the word *ἐρυθρός* "red", which at his time might have denoted a different section of the spectrum than in modern Greek, but he chose "wine-coloured", the colour of red wine in all probability not having changed since his days.

<sup>10</sup> Benveniste, Émile, "*Semantische Probleme der Rekonstruktion*". In: Schmidt, R. (editor), *Etymologie. Wege der Forschung*, vol. CCCLXXIII. Darmstadt 1977, pp. 338 - 361. Appeared originally in *Word*, vol.X, No. 2-3, Aug.-Dec. 1954, pp.251 - 264.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 339. The author here gives as an example the English homophone story "a narrative" and storey "any of the parts into which a building is divided horizontally" (This definition from: *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed. 1990, s.v. story).

In this paper we will attempt to establish, whether there does indeed exist the above mentioned "*usage in which the two regain their unity*" for lexical items like e. *to burn* "to blaze or glow with fire; be in the state characteristic of fire", "use or be used as a source of heat, light, or other energy"<sup>13</sup> and *burn* "a small stream"<sup>14</sup>, German *brennen* "to burn" and *Brunnen* "a fountain, a brooklet, a spring, a well", German *Brand* "a fire" and *Brandung* "the breaking waves of the sea on the beach", *backen* "to bake" and *Bach* "a brooklet, a burn"

To prehistoric humans, after they had managed to handle fire, at least two phenomena connected with it must have been of the utmost importance, namely the phenomena of "light, shining" and of "heat". It was the prehistoric humans' skill in handling fire which distinguished them from their fellow creatures. Their ability to handle fire allowed them to light up the night, to warm their bodies in a cold environment, to cook their food, and keep away wild beasts. By their ability to handle fire and to put it to good use, they became unique among the creatures upon the earth.

In Greek mythology Prometheus, who had given humans fire and taught them how to handle it, was punished by Zeus, because the gift of fire had brought humanity nearer to the gods. A look into mythology can also provide us with a hint on how prehistoric humans perceived the two phenomena of *fire* and *water*. According to M.L.West<sup>15</sup>, "the Indo-Iranian

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<sup>13</sup> *The concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition 1990, s.v. burn

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> West, M.L., *Indo-European Poetry and Myth*, Oxford 2007, pp. 271-274

pantheon includes a marvellous, mysterious being known as (Vedic) *Apam*<sup>16</sup> *napat-*, (Avestan) *Apam nāpat-* "the napat of the waters". *Nāpa* is cognate to Latin *nepos* "grandchild, progeny"<sup>17</sup>, so his name would mean "progeny of the waters", a name, as we shall see below, which was also used to refer to fire at the far north-western end of the area, where Indo-European languages were spoken. "*This deity resides in the waters. He shines there in golden splendour, surrounded by the youthful, divine, female waters who nurture him ... He can be identified with Agni, but also distinguished from him...; he is somehow a form of fire, but not synonymous with fire. Agni too is often said to have his abode in the waters... The seven streams nurtured his strength...*"<sup>18</sup>. The god's name *Agni* is from *agnīs* "fire", the Sanskrit cognate of Latin *ignis* "fire", Proto-Slavonic \**ogъnъ* "fire", cf. Old Bulgarian *огнь*, Russian *огонь*, Czech *oheň*, Polish *ogień*, etc., all meaning "fire". On page 272 the same author points out that the ninth-century Norwegian poet Thiodolf uses the phrase *sævar niðr* "grandson / descendant of the sea" as a kenning for "fire".

In Greek mythology, again, the god *Hephaestus*, Latin *Vulcanus* or *Mulciber* "he who soothes the flames" appears in a similar context. He was born to the goddess *Hera* who had conceived him without having had any sexual encounter. Being dismayed by such an ugly child (he was lame, among other things), the Goddess flung him into the Ocean, where the Nereid *Thetis*<sup>19</sup> "aunt" and the Oceanide *Eurynome* reared the child for nine

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<sup>16</sup> *Apam* is perhaps cognate to Latin *aqua* "water", Old High German *aha* German *Ache*, *Aue* "a brook, a small river", the first element of English *island* and many more Indo-European cognates all relating to water.

<sup>17</sup> cf. French *neveu*, English *nephew*, German *Neffe* etc.

<sup>18</sup> West, M.L., *ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> *Θέτις* "aunt", possibly cognate with Proto-Slavonic \**teta* "aunt".

years before he managed to return to Olympus. He became the God of Fire, his name *Ηφαιστος* being also used metonymically to denote "fire"<sup>20</sup>.

The mythological background outlined above makes it clear that in prehistoric humans' ideation of the world they lived in (or more exactly: prehistoric humans' thinking and communicating in an Indo-European idiom), from ancient India in the East to ancient Greece in the South to Scandinavia in the North-West, *fire* and *water* were not felt to be such irreconcilable opposites as we consider them to be today.

The contemporary usage of words denoting *to burn* makes it clear that at least two phenomena associated with fire, *light* and *heat* are still associated with *burning* etc: e.g. the sentence *someone left the light burning*, is correct, even if the source of light was a fluorescent lamp which practically doesn't emit any heat. The same is true of German *er hat das Licht brennen lassen* "he's left the light burning". In English *to light* can also denote "turning on the light in a dark environment" as well as "to light a fire". In Russian besides *теплеть* "to become warm, to warm up", *тепло* "warmth" we also find *ай багача затеплитъ свечу* "give me fire to lighten the candle", *теплитъ свечу, лампа ку пере иконой* "to have a candle, a lantern burn in front of the icon", *свеча теплится в церкви* "a candle is burning in the church", whereas the abstract *теплота* never denotes *light* but only *heat*, the same applies to composite words like *теплофикация* "heating" and *тепловентилятор* "hair-dryer". The most common word for "fire" in

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<sup>20</sup> West, M.L., op.cit. p.271 These myths are quite reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, Vers 94: "She bathes in water, yet her fire must burn".

Russian is *озойть*, e.g. *ай озойку на трубку* "give me a light for my pipe" besides *нет ни озойёчка* "there's not light to be seen. Everything is dark". In the same way *палить* refers to both phenomena: *солнце палит* "the sun is burning" and *свечей у нас нет, палим лучину* "we have no candles, so we use a pine-splinter". Russian *печь* normally means "to bake", but in some dialects it is synonymous with *светить* "to shine"<sup>21</sup>. Russian *ярыӀ* means "fiery, very hot," but also denotes "very bright, shining, white", both meanings reflecting Old Russian *яръ* "fire". The same applies to Serbian and Kroatian *j̄arak* "glowing, hot" as well as "light, shining". There is no *j̄ar* "fire" documented for either language, but there is a noun *j̄ara* "heat in the oven" and dialect (Lika) verb *j̄arnuti* "to stir the fire". In Serbian and Croatia the verb *gorjeti* not only denotes "burning" as in all other Slavonic languages, but also "to shine", e.g. *gore joj oči kao u čengije* "her eyes are shining like the eyes of a dancer"<sup>22</sup>. Serbian and Croatian *upaliti* means in *upaliti vatru* "to light a fire", *upaliti svijetlo, lampu, peć* "to switch on a light, a lamp, an oven", and finally to switch on any electrical appliance, even though it is not producing any heat or light: *upaliti televiziju, radio* "to switch on the tv, the radio". In Kashubian the verb *palëc* denotes 1."to light a fire; to heat" 2. "to shine;" 3. "to burn sth." 4. "to smoke tabaco": e.g. *obzëma më ju od čv'ärtë pälëmë vid* "in winter we already have the lights on from 4 o'clock. In Czech *zápal* denotes 1."ignition (of a car), 2. an offering by fire for the Gods, 3. shining, light, brightness", e.g. *zápal letního nebe* "the brightness of a sky in summer", *zableskly se mu oči zápalem* "his eyes were

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<sup>21</sup> Даль, В.И., Трлковый Словарь Живого Великорусского Языка, Petersburg 1862, reprint 1978.

<sup>22</sup> Karadžić, Vuk Stefanović, Kleine Serbische Grammatik. Reprint München 1974.



shining brightly"; Czech *žehat*, *žahat* "to burn" and (old) "to shine", e.g. *vzal světlo i žahal, aby lépe bylo viděti* "He took the light and illuminated (the place) so people could see better", Czech *hořet* "1. to burn, 2. to shine" e.g. *jasně hořely hvězdy* "the stars were shining brightly" besides *hořel lustr* "the candles were burning". Czech *žár* "1. heat; 2. fire; 3. light, brightness; 4. redness, rozy colour; evening glow". Czech *žhavý* "1. burning; 2. (poetic) shining", e.g. *žhavé odrazy světél v řece* "the bright reflections of the lights in the river". Polish *gorzeć* usually denotes "to burn", but in 17th century usage it can also mean "to shine" *tego roku kometa gorzała miesiąca lutego* "in February of that year a comet was shining". In Old Polish we find the adjective *jarki* "1. hot and 2. light, shining". In Bulgarian there is a verb *грея* "1. to warm; 2. to shine" with a passiv participle *греен* "1. warm 2. (dialect) shining brightly".

The above now allows us to demonstrate the semasiological development by the graph below: *Fire* and *to burn* was as used to give a name to light phenomena as well as it was used to name phenomena associated with heat. The above allows us to sketch the onomasiological pattern<sup>23</sup> by the diagram below:

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<sup>23</sup> In this context we prefer the term *onomasiological* as it stresses the fact that it were early humans who gave names to the things surrounding them, comparing them with things they already had names for, whereas *semasiology* suggests some sort of name immanent to things, which is reminiscent of the Vulgata version of Genesis 2, 19 where Adam called every living creature *nominibus suis*, "by their names" i.e. names innate to them? For further and deeper discussion of this point cf. Ecco, Umberto, *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea*, Roma-Bari 1993

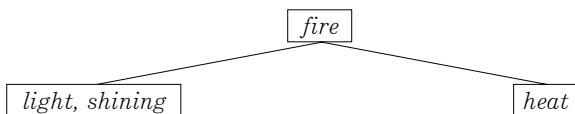


Diagram 1

We have already mentioned a few examples of lexical items related to fire phenomena as well as to water phenomena. In the following we will cite a few more instances which will weigh against the argument of sheer phonetic coincidence:

The Indo-European root *\*bher-* which underlies the above mentioned German *brennen*, *Brunnen*, *Born*, *Brand*, *Brandung*, English *to burn* (of a fire), *a burn* "a little river", Irish *brenn-* "to gush forth"<sup>24</sup> and also leads to Latin *fervere* "to boil", and to Greek *φρέαρ* "a fountain, a spring". Latin *aestus*, *aestūs* denotes not only "heat, fire" but also the "swell of the waves on the beach", the verb *aestuo*, *aestuarē* means "to burn, to foam (of the breakers rolling on the beach), whence the English *estuary*. The Indo-European root is *\*aidh-* "to burn", which also leads to Latin *aestās* "summer".

In Slavonic languages again we find a host of instances for this usage of verbs originally meaning "to burn": Slovenian *plati*, *poljem* "to blaze, to flare" also is used to describe the "rolling of the sea". Russian *гореть* "to burn", besides Russian dialect *море горит погодою* "the sea is stormy",

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<sup>24</sup> Partridge, Eric, *Origins. A short etymological dictionary of modern English. Fourth edition.* London 1966 s.v. *boorn*, *bourne*

literally "the sea is burning from the weather."<sup>25</sup> In Kashubian, the language of the Kashubian people living in Northern Poland on the coast of the Baltic sea, besides *gořec są* "to burn" we hear *jis są moře gořit* "today the sea is raging"<sup>26</sup>

A number of expressions in Slavonic languages describing water phenomena are derived from Proto-Slavonic *\*vьrěti* "to be hot, to boil", the zero grade to Proto-Slavonic *\*varь* "heat, blaze", all linked to IE. *\*aǵer-*, cf. Armenian *vařem* "to light a fire", *vařim* "to burn"<sup>27</sup>, Hettite *uar-* "to burn", Latvian *wersme* "a fire", Old Bulgarian *варь* "a fire", Proto-Germanic *\*uarma*<sup>28</sup> "warm". The full-grade form *\*aǵer-* appears with a suffix *-lo, -dlo* in Protoslavonic *\*verdlo, \*verlo*, Czech *vřídlo* "a hot spring", *vír* "a swirl in a river", cognate to *vřít* "to boil, to simmer" *vřelý* "hot" and *vroucí* "boiling, simmering", in Polish we find *wir* "a swirl" besides *wrzec* "to boil; to bubble, to spout forth", as in *więc źródła one pięknie między drzewki wraja* "and so the springs flow beautifully among the trees"<sup>29</sup>, Slovenian *vir* and *vrelec* "spring", Serbian and Croatian *vrelo* and *izvor* "a spring", *vir* "a swirl", *vrutak*, dialect *vručak* "a spring", besides *vreo* "hot" and *vruć* "hot" all of

<sup>25</sup> АНСССР, Институт русского языка, *Словарь русских народных говоров*, Leningrad 1972 s.v. *гореть*

<sup>26</sup> Sychta, Bernard, *Słownik gwar Kaszubskich na tle kultury ludowej*. Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1967 s.v. *gořec są*

<sup>27</sup> Pokorny, Julius, *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 5th edition, Tübingen 2005 s.v. *aǵer-* also links these words, but his starting-point is "to boil, to simmer", hence "heat", hence "to burn", which is quite in the opposite direction of the cases we cited about: *water phenomenon to fire*.

<sup>28</sup> If not from IE. *\*gʷh̥ar̥mo* "to burn". Pokorny gives "hot, warm" as the meaning of this root, but as it lead to Slavonic *\*gorěti*, *\*žьrati* "to burn", Sanskrit *haras* "a blaze", "to burn" seems to be a more probable original meaning.

<sup>29</sup> Rej, Mikołaj, *Wizerunk własny život człowieka poczciwego*, 24b, Kraków 1558.

them derivations of the verb *ureti* "to boil, to simmer, to ferment". In Bulgarian dialect we find to the same root *urelo* "hot spring".

With the mythological background outlined above in mind and the etymological evidence linking *light* and *heat* as sources to the phenomenon *fire* on the one hand and the evidence of associating water phenomena with *burning* and *fire* on the other hand, the only way imaginable to link *fire* and *water phenomena* seems to lead through the intermediate stage of *light, shining*, the diagram shown above now taking this shape :

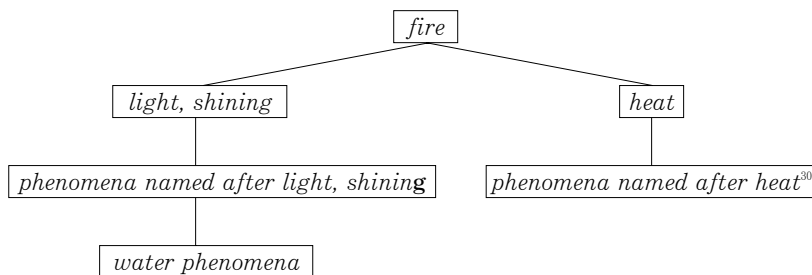


Diagram 2

To find out the width of distribution of this onomasiological pattern, i.e. naming water phenomena with words originally denoting light, we'll now fill the above diagram with Indoeuropean roots denoting "fire" and "to burn" and their "offspring". In the box "fire, to burn" will appear the Indoeuropean roots in their (1) *full-grade form (with e-vocalism)*, (2) *o-grade form (with o-vocalism)*, (3) *zero-grade form (no vowel)*, (4) *lengthened grade*

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<sup>30</sup> A future paper is planned to deal with these phenomena, as for now, cf. Voth, Matthias, *Semantische Stammbäume als Hilfsmittel semasiologischer Rekonstruktion*, Hamburg 1986

form (with lengthened vocalism), (5) shortened form (with a shortened vocalism), (6) reduced form (a form with a morphological loss)

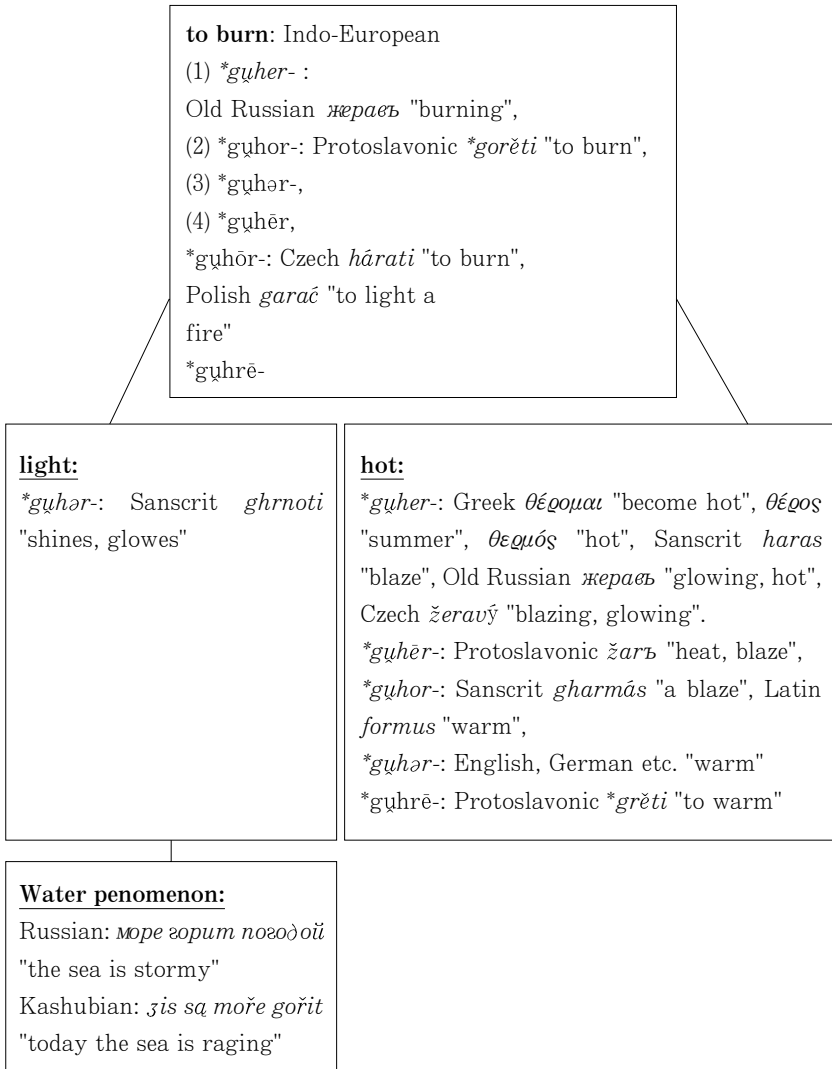


Diagram 3

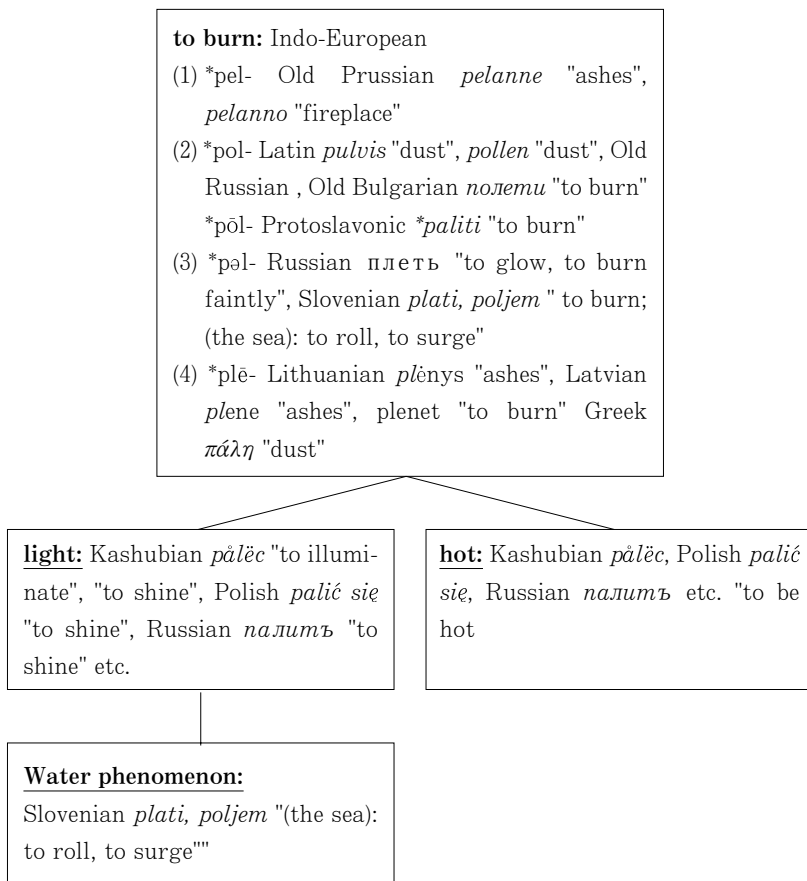


Diagram 4

**to burn:** Indo-European

- (1) \**a<sub>1</sub>uer*, \**u<sub>1</sub>er* Latvian *wersme* "glowing fire"
- (2) \**u<sub>1</sub>or-* Hettite *u<sub>1</sub>ar-* "to burn", Armenian *vařem* "to light a fire", *vařim* "to burn"
- (3) \**u<sub>1</sub>er*
- (4) \**u<sub>1</sub>ōr-*

**light:** No light phenomenon documented, but their existence at some point of the development is very probable, because of the following well documented water phenomena.

**hot:**

Oldbulgarian *варъ* "heat", Proto-Slavonic \**u<sub>1</sub>er̥ti* "to boil", as in Polish *wrząć*, Kashubian *vřeć*, Slovak *vriet'* "to boil", Russian *есть* "to eat intensely", Czech *vřelý*, Slovenian *vrel*, Croatian and Serbian *vřeđo*, etc. "hot, boiling hot", Bulgarian *врял* "hot, boiling". The present participle of \**u<sub>1</sub>er̥ti* is used in the same sense: Czech *vroucí* "hot", Slovenian *vroč* "hot". This root is probably cognate to Proto-Germanic \**u<sub>1</sub>ar<sub>1</sub>ma* "warm"<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> cf. Footnote 28

**Water phenomenon:**

Lithuanian *vėrdu, vėrti* "to boil, gush, spout forth".

Latvian *verdu, virt* "ibid."

Proto-Slavonic \**verdlo* "a spring, fountain"

Proto-Slavonic \**vьrěti* "to boil, gush, spout forth", with a suffix *-dlo, -lo* "a spring, fountain" as in Czech *vřídlo* "a spring", Kashubian *vřódlo* "a fenny area", *řódlo* "a spring",

Croatian and Serbian *vrělo* "a hot spring"

Diagram 5

Onomasiologically speaking, *light, shining* had become one of the *motifs* used by prehistoric humans to describe water phenomena. Together with the mythological background, this method of semasiological reconstruction can add more probability to existing etymological interpretations and allows us to look more pointedly for missing links in the onomasiological chain naming or putting into words the world around us. Etymology, not in the Aristotelian sense of discovering *το ἔτυμον*, the "true" meaning of a word (*λόγος*), but as *one* method of palaeolinguistic research, can provide us with a better understanding of how our prehistoric ancestors experienced and categorized their physical as well as mental environment.



A further study will describe more phenomena named after this motif of "*burning*", "*fire*", which has not only been used to describe phenomena of the surrounding world of nature, but also to describe and give names to phenomena of the human physiological as well as psychological spheres.