

The etymology of Finnish *laakso* ‘valley’¹

Words for ‘valley’ are mostly connected with words applied to curved, hollow shapes, from a common notion of ‘bend, curve’.

Carl Darling Buck 1949

Thanks to our esteemed jubilarian, the world knows the Finnish word *laakso*, meaning ‘valley, lowland, glen, dell’, in the South Ostrobothnian dialect also ‘pond, puddle’. The long vowel is not only secondary but also recent, since throughout the 16th and 17th centuries the word was always written as *laxo*, whereas *laaxo* did not become common until the 18th century (VKS s.v. *laakso*). The primary short-vowel form *lakso* is still dialectally widespread and, above all, attested in the geographically most peripheral dialects from Ingria to Finnmark (SMS s.v. *laakso*). Furthermore, the cognates in the other Finnic languages unambiguously point to the short-vowel reconstruction **lakso* ~ **laksu* (SSA 1995: 32):

- Ingrian *laksu, lakso* ‘glade, field’ (Nirvi 1971: 246).
- Karelian *lakšu* ‘glen, bog hole’ (KKS s.v. *lakšu*).
- Veps *laks* (gen. *laksón*) ‘ravine’ (Zaiceva 2010: 208).
- Votic *laksu, laksi, lakso* ‘glade’ (VOT 2013: 571–572).
- Estonian (Martna) *laks* (gen. *laksu, lakso*) ‘pond, puddle’ (EMS s.v. *laks₆*).²

The Votic words (not mentioned by SSA) are evidently borrowings from Ingrian because in inherited vocabulary we would expect the shift *ks* > *hs*. As Estonian *laks* is attested in only one (former) parish, the distribution of the word family is therefore almost limited to North Finnic. Namely, all the suggested extra-Finnic cognates have already been rejected: Komi *лoс*

¹ This paper is a slightly extended version of three footnote rows in an earlier article of mine (Kallio 2015: 88).

² Estonian *laks* earlier used to be translated as ‘großer breiter Platz’ (Hupel 1780: 200) and ‘grosser Platz, Fläche’ (Wiedemann 1869: 499), but no such meanings can be found in EMS.

‘moist lowland’ by UEW (1988: 683), Hill Mari *лаксы* ‘pit, hollow’ by Riho Grünthal (1992: 225–227), and North Saami *leakšá* ‘boggy valley’ by Janne Saarikivi (2001: 101).

What we have left is dialectal Finnic **lakso* with no generally accepted external or internal etymology. For instance, the suggested Germanic source **slaga(n)*- ‘wetness’ (Katz 1990: 40) presupposes such a bizarre metathesis that any further criticism would be a waste of ammo (see already LÄGLOS 1996: 146–147). On the other hand, the rival idea to connect **lakso* with **la(a)kēda* ‘flat, wide’ (Nikkilä 1998: 95–96) is based on the concept of “suffix alternation” stretching the standard word-formation rules (cf. Laakso 2017: 138–141).³

Hence, **lakso* lacks a convincing etymology, but does this automatically mean that it belongs to the most ancient autochthonous vocabulary (cf. NES 2004: 552)? True, this is exactly what most Uralicists have traditionally thought, whereas most Indo-Europeanists would take such a word for a borrowing from some unknown source language. While both of these conclusions are admittedly based on negative evidence, it should not be too difficult to choose between “native” and “borrowed” (cf. Laakso 2001) when our two alternatives are as follows:⁴

- a) **lakso* was inherited from Proto-Uralic but was later lost everywhere else in the Uralic language family apart from the Finnic languages mentioned above.
- b) **lakso* was borrowed into North-Central Finnic from some unknown source language which later became extinct.

³ Just to set the record straight, I personally have nothing against “native” etymologies, I have suggested them before (e.g. Kallio 2015: 89), and I would like to suggest one more: as is well-known, Finnish *salama* ‘lightning’ is a derivative of Uralic **šala-* ‘to flash, to lighten’, but Finnish *salakka* ‘bleak’ also seems to be, because the bleak (*Alburnus alburnus*) is named after its shiny silvery colour in many other languages as well. However, this and my other “native” etymologies are in agreement with the standard word-formation rules – just as they are in agreement with the established sound laws. Needless to say, one can freely loosen up the criteria, but in that case one should also acknowledge being less critical.

⁴ Technically, there is also a third alternative: **lakso* is a case of onomatopoeia, sound symbolism, *Urschöpfung* or the like. However, no one has ever even raised such a possibility, thus making it futile to discuss it.

It goes without saying that the latter alternative makes more sense – especially now when the Uralic language family has been shown to be a Bronze-Age newcomer in the eastern Baltic Sea region (Lang 2018), whose earlier languages were assimilated by Finnic as well as Saami. Such an assimilation process must have left linguistic traces known as substrate features, for which **lakso*, as a geographic term, is an excellent candidate (Saarikivi 2004: 203). Besides, Saami *leakšá*, too, has already been mentioned as a potential substrate word (Aikio 2004: 11), and although it cannot go back to the same proto-form as Finnic **lakso*, their irregular sound correspondences could be explained by borrowing from the same unknown source language.

While all this sounds perfectly plausible, there is of course a problem of circularity: Finnic **lakso* and Saami *leakšá* are our only evidence of the word from which they were allegedly borrowed. Even worse, it is a methodological pitfall to posit unknown languages in order to explain irregular sound correspondences in known languages. Despite making more linguistic sense, the explanatory value of such substrate arguments is not really higher than that of all those sporadic sound changes posited by old-school Uralicists in order to explain everything. As far as Saami is concerned, there are fortunately hundreds of other possible substrate words making the case stronger (see Aikio 2004, 2012: 80–88).

Yet Finnic is another story because the number of potential substrate words is considerably smaller, not to mention that hardly anything in their phonology, word formation, etc. points to a non-Uralic origin. Meanwhile, Finnic has a couple of hundreds of borrowings from Baltic, traditionally interpreted as superstrate words. This interpretation was perfectly reasonable as long as Uralic was thought to have arrived near the Baltic Sea before Indo-European. Since things have now changed, the Baltic loanwords in Finnic should be reanalysed as substrate words (Parpola 2012: 133; Kallio 2015: 87–90). Among other things, they include particularly many geographical terms typical of substrate influence (Vaba 2011: 756–757).

One of the Finnic geographical terms of Baltic origin is Finno-Saamic **laktâ* ‘bay’ > Finnish *laksi* (replaced by *lahti* due to the analogy of the oblique stem *lahte-*), North Saami *luokta*, etc. Lauri Posti (1977: 267–268) connected this word with Latvian (Curonianism) *lañktis* ‘yarn wind-

er’, Lithuanian *lañktis* ‘yarn winder’, and Old Prussian *lanctis* ‘oven fork’. His etymology only makes semantic sense if one knows that all these words go back to the Baltic word for ‘bend, curve’ derived from the verbal root **lenk-* ‘to bend’ whose derivatives also include Latvian *licis* and Lithuanian *įlanka*, both meaning ‘bay’. However, the derivatives of **lenk-* do not end here, but especially the following are semantically interesting (Derksen 2015: 272–273, 280, 287):

- Latvian *lañka* ‘bend of a river, big low-lying meadow, big puddle’.
- Lithuanian *lankà* ‘water-meadow, swamp, valley, vale’; *lénkė* ‘vale, depression, moist and boggy place, meadow, marsh’; *linka* ‘hollow, depression’; *linkis* ‘bend, curve, vale, dale’.

Indeed, we are now suspiciously close to the meanings of North-Central Finnic **lakso*. Thus, let us follow Posti’s footsteps: since Lithuanian *lañktis* (gen. *lañkčio*) is a *ja*-stem, the Baltic proto-form can be reconstructed as **lanktja-* which would have been borrowed as Early or Middle Proto-Finnic **lakća* or **lakca*, because heavier consonant clusters were impossible. As for word-medial consonantism, Middle and Late Proto-Finnic **kc* yielded *ks* except for South Estonian where we find *ts* (cf. Finnic **ükci* > Finnish *yksi*, Võro *ütś* ‘one’), but this time there is no South Estonian cognate. As for second-syllable vocalism, the labial vowel could be considered suffixal, judging from the irregular variation between **o* and **u*.

Hence, there are no phonological problems to derive Finnic **lakco* from the similar Baltic source from which Posti derived Finno-Saamic **laktâ*, the latter of which was probably an earlier borrowing due to its wider distribution.⁵ There are no semantic problems either because the shift from ‘bend’ to ‘valley’ is as well-attested as that from ‘bend’ to ‘bay’ (Buck 1949: 27–28, 38–39). Before anyone asks, the answer is no as to whether **lakco* could have been derived from **lakci* (< **laktâ*), because suffixal **o* would in no way have been added to the nominative **lakci* but to the oblique stem **laktë-*, thus leading to ***lakto*.

⁵ As an anonymous referee kindly reminded me, dialectal Lithuanian *lañktis* (gen. *lañkties*) after all points to an original *i*-stem. Thus, Finno-Saamic **laktâ* was apparently borrowed from earlier Baltic **lankti-*, whereas Finnic **lakco* stems from later Baltic **lanktja-*.

Although Posti's etymology for Finno-Saamic **laktâ* is now universally accepted, it was not an instant hit (see the appendix of Junttila 2015). It was not even mentioned by UEW (1988: 234), which instead offered Ob-Ugric look-alikes no longer recycled in today's etymological dictionaries (SSA 1995: 36; NES 2004: 558; EES 2012: 222). The last of the Mohicans was Janne Saarikivi who earlier called Posti's etymology "questionable" (2001: 90) or "somewhat uncertain" (2004: 200) but who now calls it "correct" (2006: 288), just to give something to think about for those who are planning to tattoo Saarikivi's etymologies.

As our jubilarian has often pointed out, etymologies are not necessarily accepted or rejected on etymological grounds, but there is a lot of favouritism between "native" and "borrowed", Baltic and Germanic, etc. (Laakso 2001, forthcoming). In Finland, however, we also have this thing called *pärstäkerroin* 'subjective assessment of personal acceptability'. In other words, the name of an etymologist can matter more than the quality of an etymology, although "even Homer sometimes nods", whereas "even a blind squirrel can find a nut once in a while". As for me and my etymology, only the future will tell.

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