Etymology and Semantic Fields: the DWEE-Project

Deutsche Wortfeldetymologie in europäischem Kontext =
Semantic Field Etymology in German
and in European Context

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1 Preliminary remarks

The analysis of semantic fields is the main goal of the DWEE-project “Semantic Field Etymology in German and in European Context: The human being in nature and culture”, that is funded by the Saxonian Academy of Sciences. As the title says, the intention is to analyse the German vocabulary on the basis of the central conceptual field “human being”, by concerning the modular structure of this field, its historical layering in relation to the European language area and in a language stage oriented semantic field comparison. The timeframe of the investigation goes back from Modern High German via Early Modern High German and Middle High German to Old High German. Further Germanic languages and other Indo-European languages are used when they are required for the semantic field etymology. The units of analysis are the nouns, so called “Begriffswörter”.

We are concerned with the following central questions:

- How is a certain fact, a certain concept denoted in a language or in a group of related (or non-related) languages?
- Are there several verbalisations and if so, how do they relate to each other in geographical, stylistic or quantitative respect?
- Where do the verbalisations come from? Are there typical source concepts from which they originate?

The natural concept of the human being constitutes the starting point before cultural references are presented. Thus the biological features of the human being are treated first and then the cultural features. This leads us to the following semantic fields on a meta-level:

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1 For critical review of the text and valuable suggestions I would like to thank Harald Bichlmeier, Bettina Bock and Sergio Neri.
(A) biological features of the human being
(B) cultural features of the human being
(B) (1) the human being in everyday life
(B) (2) the human being in the diversity of its cultural relations
(B) (2) (a) the human being and society
(B) (2) (b) the human being and religion and ethics
(B) (2) (c) the human being and economy
(B) (2) (d) the human being and science and arts
(B) (2) (e) the human being and new technologies

In dialogue with modern linguistics and by contact with several other dictionary-projects the following basic aspects can be found in our work: Concerning the etymology the latest state of knowledge of Indo-European research is presented adequately. The change of meaning will be analysed according to the principles of modern semantics. Moreover, the so called “Benennungsmotiv” (the impulse that gave rise to the name) is identified and included into the history of the word as well as into the factual history. That the German vocabulary is not an isolated one, but stands in intercultural relations, is shown by the inclusion of foreign words, especially so called Europeanisms, German borrowings from and into other languages and Europhrases. The language stage oriented semantic fields are compared based on their content from a diachronic perspective, as Jost Trier (1931) demonstrated first for the vocabulary of the “sense area of the mind” (“Sinnbezirk des Verstandes”). Thus our approach consists of several components: semantics of the semantic field and its words from synchronic and diachronic perspective; etymology; diachronic comparison of semantic fields and within a field; European component, etymology of the semantic field.

We started with the first semantic field on the meta-level “biological features of the human being” and analysed the “terms for parts of the body” section. Now, we limit ourselves to a central term from this segment, namely the concept “hand”. The different namings for “hand” in older German imply that this is a multifaceted historico-cultural concept. In earlier times the hand was an existential instrument for mastering one’s life. Therefore, in the German dialects, in Early New High German, in Middle High German and in Old High German many synonyms existed. In the following it is shown how highly differentiated

\(^2\) Cf. Bock/Lühr 2014.
the semantics was, especially from a diachronic perspective. Hereby, we want to find out whether the words for the concept “hand” were semantically opaque, i.e. unmotivated, or motivated for speakers at the time. If they are unmotivated, lexeme substitution and lexeme loss occurred often. It needs to be answered with a view on the neighboring concepts and their namings why this took place. In the course of time different diachronic semantic field layers can be identified. Our next issue is the comparison of the semantics of the concept “hand” in older stages with Modern High German. Finally semantic parallels from other Indo-European languages are given.

2 Semantics of a semantic field section from a diachronic perspective

As lexeme substitution and lexeme loss came to pass frequently within the semantic field segment “hand” the meaning of the neighbouring words in the field must be carefully determined. Although the basic word hand is unmotivated in present-day language this was not the case with other words for this concept in older language stages of German. One can find many synonyms in the German dialects, in Middle High German (MHG) and Old High German (OHG):

OHG füst, MHG füst ‘fist’; OHG Bavarian, Alemannic tenar, tenra ‘flat hand’, MHG Upper German tener, NHG Styrian ten, tien ‘flat hand’ (Bavarian tern ‘slap in the face’); MHG laffe ‘flat hand’; OHG goufa ‘a handful’, OHG goufana ‘handful, hollow hand’, MHG goufe ‘hollow hand’, NHG Bavarian (gauffel) gauffen ‘the bowl formed by two hands held together’; OHG goufsa ‘a handful’; OHG gousana ‘a handful’; OHG gavila ‘a handful’; OHG goffela ‘handful’; NHG Upper German gaufe, Older NHG Gaufel; MHG neve-mez ‘measure of a fist, handful’; OHG wini(s)star, MHG winter(e) ‘left hand’; OHG lenka ‘left hand’ (MHG link, lenk), Austro-Bavarian tengge, tenke ‘left hand’; Bavarian, Alemanic letze ‘left hand’

Moreover, the following words can only be found in Old High German:

OHG breta ‘flat hand’; OHG hantbreita ‘palma extensa’; OHG folma ‘flat hand’; OHG laffa, lappo ‘flat hand’; OHG flazza ‘palm, palma’; OHG munt, munda ‘palmus, hand as a measure of length’; spanna ‘flat hand as a measure of length’
The prototypical and stereotypical features of the term “hand” in present-day language are helpful in the identification of the motivation of these namings. Thus hand is prototypically characterized by the following features:\(^3\)

- **<IS: the lowest part of the arm>**
- **<IS: the counterpart to the foot, also regarding the structure>**
- **<FUNCTION: to grasp and hold>**
- **<FUNCTION: to feel>**
- **<IS: consisting of palm and five fingers>**
- **<IS: an important feature of the human species>**
- **<IS: in pairs>**

And stereotypes are:

- **<with rolled up fingers and tucked up thumb>, <with strength> geballte Hand “clenched hand”, Faust “fist”**
- **<upwards open> hohle Hand “hollow hand”**
- **<flat> flache hand “flat hand”**

The next step of our investigation is the question whether the words stated above were semantically opaque, i.e. unmotivated, or motivated for speakers at the time. In the second case they could be arranged in word families. Word families are important structural features of the language awareness\(^4\) because the speaker can establish meaning relations on the synchronic level by himself. To investigate this procedure is very useful for the diachronic comparison of a semantic field.

If one starts with OHG *win(i)star*, MHG *winster(e)* ‘left hand’ it seems as if in this case the left hand was viewed as the more favourable one, thus an old positive concept. The word is originally a comparative formation Proto-Germ. *jenistrō* (Old Icelandic *vinistri*), which belongs to the root *yenh-* ‘become fond of’, that can be found in the Latin *venus* ‘love, charm’; cf. related Old Indic *vāma-* ‘dubious’, *vānate* ‘loves, has appreciation’.\(^5\) A parallel in word formation and semantics is Latin *sinist(e)ra* ‘left hand, left side’. Old Indic *sānīyān* ‘more useful, more advantageous’, Old Indic *sanōti* ‘wins, gains’, Avestan *hanaēmai*

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\(^3\) Cf. DWEE s.v. *Hand* (Bock), esp. the rubric “prototypicality”.

\(^4\) Blank 2001: 155.

\(^5\) LIV 682f.
‘we want to win’ < Proto-IE *senh₂ are related. The Austro-Bavarian tengge, tenke ‘left hand’ is based on this notion, too, because the early form *denki ‘the better, pleasant, good’ is related to the word thanks. However, neither win(I)star nor Austro-Bavarian tengge, tenke are semantically motivated in Old High German. The original meaning was probably not known anymore.

Moreover, one can also find the contrary notion in terms for the left hand often: OHG lenka ‘left hand’ (MHG lenk, link) together with NHG linkisch. OHG lenka means ‘the slack’ and belongs to the Latin langue ‘to be slack, to be idle’ (< *(s)l̪-n-g; with renewed ablaut in pre-Proto-Germ. *leng-). Present-day speakers may connect die Linke with linkisch ‘clumsy’, however, this is an derivation of link ‘left’. Thus, the etymological meaning is not conscious anymore, but the relation to link, linkisch is. A similar meaning, as for OHG lenka is the basis of Bavarian, Alemannic letze ‘left hand’. The pre-form *lattija- means ‘the idle’. It is safe to assume that the speakers were aware of the relationship with Bavarian letz ‘decrepit, sickly, infirm’ (Alemannic letz, lätz ‘athwart’; cf. Gothic lats, Old Norse latr, Old English let, OHG laz ‘idle’, Old Frisian let ‘evil’). All in all, the concept of ‘left hand’ possesses a negative connotation in Germanic languages as the etymology of Gothic hleidumei (sc. handus) ‘left hand’, actually ‘the crooked’, shows. It can be linked to the root of Latin clivium (auspicium), Lithuanian šleivás ‘bow-legged’, Old Irish clé, Middle Bretonic cleiz (< *klijo-), Old Welsh cledd, Cornish cledh ‘dubious, unhappy’ (< *klijā- < Proto-IE *klei- ‘to lean on’).

On the contrary, the right hand is considered to be the ‘more skilful one’. An example is Old Icelandic hægréi, Faroese högréi, Norwegian Bokmål, Nynorsk högre, Middle Swedish höger, Old Dansk høire ‘right (hand)’; cf. Old Norse

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4 EWAiA II: 696f.; LIV 532f. In augural language ‘left’ in the meaning of ‘prosperous’ could be used, because in the case of orientation towards the south the Eastern side of the praying man was to the left (Walde/Hofmann 1965).
5 For further reading cf. Lühr 1987: 70.
6 LIV 565.
8 Schrijver 1995: 118; de Bernardo Stempel 1999: 204; Falileyev 2000: 32; Matasović 2009: 209. IEW 602 (however to Old Icelandic hita ‘to rely on, trust, abide by’ < *klej-d-). Cf. further Modern Dansk kej, kejet ‘left hand’; to Norwegian Bokmål, Nynorsk keik ‘twisting, waggle’, Old Icelandic kekr ‘bent backwards, the belly jutting forwards’; Old Indic jihma- ‘oblique, transverse, athwart’; Norwegian Bokmål keive ‘left hand’; to Norwegian Bokmål keiv ‘oblique, sloped, twisty’; Lithuanian geibūs ‘clumsy, awkward’ (IEW 354; LITEW 141).
hægr ‘easy, skilful, gentle’, Modern Icelandic hægur, Faroese høgur, Norwegian Bokmål, Nynorsk høg ‘big, large, strong, robust’.\(^{11}\)

Ultimately, “right” and “left” are based on the stereotype <IS: in pairs>. While the original partly positively negative connotations of these concepts are not present in OHG win(i)stra, MHG winster, Austro-Bavarian tengge, tenke ‘left hand’ anymore, the speakers of Bavarian-Alemannic were probably still conscious of it in Bavarian, Alemanc letze and OHG lenka ‘left hand’.

A further naming for “hand” occurring with connotations can be found in OHG munt, munda ‘palmus, hand as a measure of length’ (Old Icelandic mund ‘hand’). The word is identical with Old English mund ‘hand, protection’, OHG munt, Old Saxon mund ‘protection, patronisation’\(^{12}\) < Proto-Germ. \(*mundō\) (beside Old Icelandic mundra ‘price of a woman, patronisation’, Old Frisian mund ‘patronisation’ < \(*munda\)-) < pre-Proto-Germ. \(*muntáh\).\(^{13}\) However, the meaning ‘protection’ is metaphorical (cf. also Middle Irish muntar ‘family’ < \(*\)‘the one who is under the charge’). The old meaning is ‘hand’, as Latin manus ‘hand’,\(^{14}\) Hittite maniājahh- ‘to hand in, to administer’, adverb maninkuwan ‘close, soon’ (< \(*\)‘at hand’)\(^{15}\) show. The meaning ‘hand’ lives on in the idioms sich in jemand’s Mund befinden (to be in somebody’s hand ‘to be under his power, his protection’), Morgenstund hat Gold in Mund\(^{16}\) (It’s the early bird that catches the worm). Naturally, this connection of OHG munt ‘hand’ is not present anymore but the link to OHG munt ‘protection’ still is.

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\(^{11}\) de Vries 1962: 278.


\(^{13}\) Specht 1944: 82; IEW 740ff. Neri (2013: 198ff.) suggests a basic meaning ‘peak’ for \(*muntāh\) by connecting this formation to the root \(*men\)- ‘to jut, rise’ (cf. Latin mentum ‘chin’, Welsh munt ‘jaw’, OHG mund ‘mouth’). A semantic parallel can be seen in the etymology of the numeral Proto-IE \(*h₂ok\ ōh₁\) ‘eight’, literally ‘two peaks’ (‘the two hands without the thumb’) (Lipp 2009: 89ff.).

\(^{14}\) The derivation of Latin manus and Greek μαρῆ ‘hand’ from an \(r/h\)-stem has to be abandoned, because a root consisting of a single consonant \(m\)- is impossible in Proto-Indo-European (Schrijver 1991: 458). Therefore, the connection with the family of Albanian merr ‘takes, gripes, receives’ (< \(*marne/o\)-, transformed from \(*mr-n-h₂\)-; vgl. Old Indic AV ni \(mr̥ih\) ‘grasp’) (GEW II: 175) is obsolete. Forssman (1966: 135ff.) doubts the authenticity of μάρη ‘hand’. The form could be coined to explain Greek εἰμαρῆς ‘easy’ (EDG 905).

\(^{15}\) Neri 2013: 185.

\(^{16}\) Mund originally was feminine.
Now concerning the bearing of the hand: An old word for the concept “clenched hand”, occurring in west Indo-European languages, is: OHG füst, MHG vüst, Old English fyst, Old Frisian fest (< *fūsti-), Serbian Church Slavonic peštvo, (with rearrangement) Lithuanian kūmštė ‘fist’ (< Proto-IE *pækʷ-sti-) originally meant ‘fiveness’ and referred to the bent fingers of the hand. Because of the loss of the nasal infront of *k̂t in Proto-Germ. *fūsti- the connection to the numeral five (Proto-IE *pēnkʷe)\(^{17}\) is not understandable for speakers of West Germanic anymore.\(^{18}\) The naming refers to the prototypical feature <consisting of five fingers>.

Another concept for “fist” is conveyed by MHG neve- in neve-mez ‘measure of a fist, handful’. It presents the fist as the ‘clenched one’; compare Old Norse hnef ‘fist, sword’, Old English PN Hnaef, OHG PN Hnabi to Old Icelandic hnafa, hnéf ‘to cut’, Old Swedish nappa ‘to pinch, pick to pieces’, Old Icelandic -hneppa ‘to pinch, clamp, press’, Old English hnaeppan ‘to hit, bump against something’.\(^{19}\) In German this word family is only present in the PN OHG Hnabi. Therefore MHG neve is unmotivated. The “Benennungsmotiv” is the function of grasping.

A further manifestation of hand is the “flat hand”.\(^{20}\) There is no possibility to connect OHG Bavarian, Alemannic tenar, tenra, MHG Upper German tener, NHG Styrian ten, tien ‘flat hand’ (Bavarian tenn ‘slap in the face’ < *denra-/ō) within German or Germanic. The word belongs to the Greek neuter ἑναρ, -αρος ‘palm, sole’ (< *dʰenə) and furthermore to Hittite ḏanareššar, gen. ḏanarešnaš ‘armpit’, actually ‘flat dip’ (cf. Greek ἥναρ ‘deepening in the upper altar surface, in which sacrifices are placed’ Pindar\(^{21}\)). OHG tener is a case of an

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\(^{17}\) Cf. furthermore Greek adverb πυζ ‘with the fist’, πυγή ‘fist, fist-fight’, πυγμαίος ‘one fist high, dwarf’, Latin pugnis ‘fist’; to Latin pungō, pugō, punctum ‘to prick’, pugiō ‘dagger’ (IEW 828; GEW 1254; Schindler 1972: 95).

\(^{18}\) Kluge/Seebold s.v. consider the phonetic closeness to Latin pugnis, Greek πυγή ‘fist, fist-fight’, πυζ ‘with the fist’ to be remarkable. The word for ‘fist’ was also connected to the root of Proto-Germ. *fänza- ‘to catch’ (IEW 839).

\(^{19}\) IEW 561; Barber 1932: 159.

\(^{20}\) Cf. also Latvian plāķsta ‘flat hand’; to Latin plautus ‘broad, flat, flat-footed’, Umbrian imperative pre-plotatu ‘prosternitum’ (IEW 838; LIN 564 footnote 14; but cf. Mühlenbach/ Endzelin III: 325); Old Indic tala- ‘surface, level, palm’; to Old Church Slavonic pl. *tla ‘ground’, Lithuanian pà-talus ‘bed’ (EWAIA 1: 637); Middle Welsh aδ ‘hand, talon’; to Proto-IE *pleθ₂- ‘to spread’ (LIV 478f).


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Upper German relict word that was apparently used for denoting flat body parts in Indo-European.

Furthermore, the flat hand was denoted by the West Germanic word OHG folma ‘flat hand’, Old English folm, Old Saxon folmōs (< *pelh₂-/p̥lh₂-). The word is also unmotivated, it is a hereditary word, too, that can directly be compared with Greek παλάμη, Latin palma (Middle Latin palmus) (< *p̥lh₂-mah₂-), Old Irish láım (< *p̥lh₂-mah₂-), actually ‘the flat’; cf. Latin plānus ‘flat, smooth, level’; cf. also Greek παλαιστή ‘palm, width of five fingers’.

OHG bretta (StSG I, 4, 9; III, 9, 41 [Cass.] preta ‘palma’) is the next term for the flat hand. It denotes a measure of length. The word connects to OHG Hildebrandslied breton ‘to strike down’, actually ‘to make flat’: V. 50 breton mit sīnu biliu ‘to strike down with his sword’. The verb is a poetic word and has got its counterpart in Old English bre(o)dwian ‘prosternere’. However, it is debatable whether a speaker of Old High German was able to link the simplex breta ‘flat hand’ to the poetic verb breton. In contrast, the compound hantbreita ‘palma extensa’ is not opaque. Even nowadays the word Handbreite ‘handbreadth’ is known as a measure of length that is based on the breadth of the palm. Comparable with it are the compounds Old Frisian hondbrede, Old English handbred < *-brīd₃a (cf. Old Frisian breed, Old English bred ‘surface’), a formation with zero grade that belongs to the adjective broad < *braið₃a- ‘broad’. breta could therefore be interpreted as ‘handbreadth’.

During the times of Old High German a motivation of the naming for OHG flazza ‘palm, palma’ was recognisable. OHG flaz ‘smooth, flat’, flazzi, flezioni ‘smoothed out floor, barn floor, hallway, front hall’ (cf. Lithuanian plādas, pladė, pladis ‘flat bread, loaf’, Latvian plaņdē ‘to make broad’) are related.

Furthermore, OHG laffa (< *lapōn-) and lappo (< *labb-a/an-) ‘flat hand’ are probably motivated in Old High German because these words among other things mean ‘oar blade’ so that the speakers were able to make a connection to

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22 Buck 1949: 239; IEW 805f.
21 EWA III: 459ff.; de Vaan 2008: 44; Kroonen 2013: 159; LIN 563ff. (*pleh₃- ‘flat, broad’), GEW II: 467 (like Greek παλάμη to a lost verb for ‘to spread’). To Avestan pariō (‘the full’, Old Indic pari- ‘hand’ cf. EWA III: 117f.
20 Cf. StSG III: 443 fora britunga ‘pretense’.
18 Kluge/Seebold s.v.: of unknown origin; Falk/Torp 1909: 277.
17 EWA II: 325ff.
16 IEW 834; EWA III: 357f.
the concept of flatness; cf. Early NHG ruderlaff ‘oar blade’. Directly related words in the Germanic languages also have the meaning ‘flat hand’: Gothic lofa, Old Icelandic lófi ‘flat hand’; cf. further Middle English lôf ‘big oar’ (< *lôfan-), Modern Icelandig lôpp ‘paw’ (< *lapp-), OHG laffâ ‘oar blade, (< *lapôn-), Modern Swedish labb ‘paw’, OHG lappo, Early NHG lappo ‘oar blade’, MHG, Early NHG lapp ‘paw’ (cf. NHG Bärlapp) (< *labb-a/an-). This is the case of a Proto-Germanic paradigm *lôfan-, *lapp- (< *labn-), where a new nominative *lapôn- was created for *lapp-, like it is continued in OHG laffâ, whereas *-bb- in *labban- shows an expressive or sound-symbolic geminate *-bb-. Apart from the Germanic words Lithuanian lôpa ‘paw’ belongs here.²⁰

The next term for the flat hand is OHG spanna ‘flat hand as measure of length’. It is certainly fully motivated for it belongs to the verb OHG spannan ‘to stretch’.

So far, we can see that there were a lot of words with the “Benennungsmotiv” ‘flat hand’ in OHG: spanna, tenar, breta, flazza and laffa, lappo. Keep in mind that this “Benennungsmotiv” is a modern prototypical feature, too.

The opposite to the “flat hand” is the “hollow bent hand”. This “Benennungsmotiv” appears in OHG goufa ‘a handful’, NHG goufe ‘hollow hand’, NHG Upper German gaufe, and in the derivations OHG gounana ‘handful, hollow hand’ (Bavarian gauffen, also gauffel ‘he bowl formed by two hands held together’), OHG gousa, OHG gousana, giovila ‘a handful’, goffela ‘handful, Gaufel’. Cf. further Middle Low German gespe, gespe, göpse, Low German gaspe ‘a hand full’, NHG Prussian gep ‘amount to be grasped by both hands’, NHG gäpse, Dutch gaps ‘both hands full’ (< *gapsôn-, *gipsôn- with folk etymological vocalism), NHG Westphalian göpsche, göppsche, göüpsche, göüpselske. The words connects to Old Norse gaupn ‘hollow hand’ (geypna ‘to collect or hold in one’s hand’) (< *gaupnô), Modern Dansk dialectal gjeve (< *gaupôn- with original nominative *gauf/bôn-). Further connections are Old English géap ‘open’, aerngéap ‘falcon’, Old English géopan ‘to gather’, Old

²⁹ Dazu Törnqvist 1949: XXXIX; Bahder 1925: 79.
³¹ AHDW IV: 371.
³² AHDW IV: 383.
³⁴ de Vries 1962: 159.
³⁵ de Vries 1962: 166.
Norse, Norwegian Nynorsk gaupa ‘lynx’, and (with different word formation and different ablaut) Lithuanian žiūpsnis ‘as much as one can grasp at once, half a handful, a little, hollow hand’ (with old p?!) < *gehup- opposite Proto-Germ. *geup- with a p-phoneme stemming from the paradigm for ‘hollow hand’. However, goufa and goufe were unmotivated in Old and Middle High German. There is no evidence for a corresponding word family. Remember, like the ‘flat hand’ the ‘hollow hand’ is a stereotype of “Hand” in New High German.

3 Comparison with Modern High German

If one has a look at the list of meaning features for the older words for “hand” in Germanic that were gained by the etymological links, the abundance of synonyms for “flat hand” catches one’s eye. The contrast between the lot of synonyms for “flat hand” and the less for the antonymous counterpart “hollow hand” is certainly due to the fact that the flat hand was used as a measure of length.

However, in Modern High German different measuring units occurred so that the loss of a matter also caused a loss of lexemes. Therefore, no new words appear in present-day language for the hand as a measure of length. Parts of the hand, like the palms, do not get new names. The only word that survived from the older group of words for “hand” is the fist. Today, it plays a role in expressing emotions; cf. clench one’s fist, or it can be found in medicine or sports.

However, whenever there are new words for the concept “hand” in German, they are part of the linguistic register. These words are semantically or phonetically motivated.

<colloquial>, <comparing with extremities of animals>

<often derogatory> Flosse ‘fin’, Klaue ‘claw’, Kralle ‘clutch’, Pfote ‘paw’

<jokingly> <big> <rude, hefty> <casual> Pratze ‘paw’, Pranke ‘paw’/ Brante (huntsmanlike expression for Pranke ‘paw’, especially of the bear), Tatze ‘paw’, MHG tepe

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37 Cf. Latin vola ‘curve, hollow of the hand or the bottom of the foot’; to Old Norse valr ‘round’.
38 The semantic field sections of arm and foot as neighbors in the semantic field show other conceptions (Bock in Bock/Zeilfelder/Ziegler 2012: 190–197).
39 Cf. DWEE s.v. Hand (Bock), esp. the rubric “synonyms”.
40 Pommeranian (contemptuously) klaufe for ‘nails’ or ‘hands’ (DW s.v.).
<children’s speech> <denoting a slapping hand> Patsche ‘paw’, Patschhand ‘paddy’.

Patschchen, patschendes Händchen ‘slapping hand(s)’; to patschen ‘to slap’

Also see the dialect variant: Datsch (Swiss German, Swabian, Bavarian also dätsch, dotsch ‘hard strike with the flat hand [sound imitating word], a slap’)

Apart from that other distinct “Benennungsmotive” in German can only be found in Rotwelsch, namely in thieves’ cant; cf.

Greifling, Griffling ‘hand’; to NHG greifen ‘to grasp’

Klummer ‘hand’; to NHG Klammer ‘hook, handle to hold on to’.

We already discussed the etymology of one word which belongs to this semantic domain: MHG neve is related to Old Icelandig -hneppa ‘to press’.

4 Semantic parallels from other Indo-European languages

But these are ancient and widespread “Benennungsmotive” as the language comparison shows, for example:

‘the bent’

Greek γρόνθος ‘clenched fist, breadth of a hand’ (*gromdʰo-), cf. Old Icelandic krumma ‘hand’

Modern Welsh anghad ‘grasp, hand’, to craf-anc ‘claw’ (Old Irish ēcath ‘fish hook’) < *ankato- (Old Church Slavonic おそ ‘hook’) 44

Lithuanian kraišys, Latvian kreilis (dissimilated from *kreiris) ‘left hand’; to Latvian kreiss ‘left, leftside’, Old Church Slavonic razkrivitii ‘to bend’

Lithuanian ranką ‘hand’ (Lithuanian renkū, riņkti ‘to pick up, to collect’), Latvian rūoka ‘hand, arm’, Old Church Slavonic рюка ‘hand’, Russian ruká ‘hand, arm’ < Balto-Slavic *yraņkā ‘hand’, Late Latin brača ‘paw’

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41 Günther 1905: 61.
42 Avé-Lallemant 1862: 107. Cf. Rotwelsch Nibbel ‘hands’, literally ‘the hand which is put together with the finger tips’; to NHG nippen ‘to sip’.
43 GEW I: 327f.; EDG 287.
44 ‘To *hǝnк- ‘to bow’ (LIV 268f.).
45 I EW 936; LATEV I: 446.
< Gaulish *y rank, to Scottish-Gaelic frōg ‘cave, swamp, hideout’, Old Norse rā ‘angle, corner’ < *y rank, actually ‘bent’

Latin laeva ‘left hand’, Greek λαοί ‘the left’; to Latin laevus ‘bent’ (Serv. georg. 3,55 laevī (sc. bovēs sunt), quōrum cornua terram spectant (opposite to licini “with horns bent upwards”), Lithuanian iš-lai-voti ‘to make bends’;

Modern Swedish dialectal kroka ‘hand’; to Modern Swedish kroka ‘bending, hook’

However, the meaning ‘the grasping, collecting, clutching, pushing’ is documented more frequently:

Old English gripa ‘handful, sheaf’, Middle Dutch grepe ‘open fist’, Old Norse greip ‘hand (with splayed out thumb)’, Modern Icelandic, Norwegian Bokmål, Nynorsk greip, Older Modern Dansk greb ‘inside of the hand’, Old English grāp ‘to grasp, grasping hand’; to OHG grīfan ‘to grasp’

Old Norse krumma, krymma ‘hand’ (*grēm-); to OHG krimman, kram ‘to tear, maul’, Old English crīmann ‘to cram, stuff’, MHG krammen ‘to grasp with the claws’; Lithuanian grūmti ‘to stuff inside, to cram’

Greek δραξ, -δρακός ‘hand’, pl. δράκες δέσμαι Hesych (with metathesis), δράγμα ‘handful, especially of corn stalks, sheaf’, δράγμας, δράγμη ‘small handful’; to Greek δράσσομαι, Attic δράττομαι ‘to grasp with the hand’

Old Church Slavonic grebst ‘fist, handful’, Old Russian grebst, Serbo-Croatian grešt ‘inner palm, handful’, Polish garść ‘hollow hand, handful’, Russian gorst ‘hollow hand, handful’, Upper Sorbian horšć ‘hollow

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46 For further connections cf. Schaffner 2001: 420.
47 Marstrander 1910: 362f.; Pokorny 1940: 50; IEW 1155.
48 Old Norse rá might be a rhyming word with vá ‘angle, corner’ (Lühr 1988: 178).
49 Specht 1944: 131; Buck 1949: 239; IEW 1155. For the semantics cf. Old Indic viś- ‘finger’ (only RV 1,144,5) which stems from the root IE *vy rīk- ‘to twist, crook’ (Avestan *r̥y Insert -īs- ‘to twist, turn’, Greek μυκός ‘bent, crooked, shrivelled (of age, dryness, cold), stiff’ (KEWA III: 281; EW Aia II: 597; EDG 1285f.).
50 Cf. Old Church Slavonic lēv, Russian lēvij < Proto-IE *lēyja-, Illyrian PN Laevicus, Levo etc.; According to GEW (II: 73) a basic meaning ‘crooked’ is uncertain.
52 Lühr 1976: 82.
53 IEW 213; GEW I: 415; Schindler 1967: 82.
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hand, bent palm, closed hand, handful’, Lower Sorbian gjarsći ‘handful’, Czech hrst ‘hollow hand, handful’ (Proto-Slavic *gŭrstĭb < *grstī-), Russian Church Slavonic pri-gŭrsča ‘handful’ (< *gurstjă); to Latvian gūrste ‘bundle of flax’ (*gursći- < *gurt-sti-), Belarusian Pry-hortátý ‘to accumulate’.

Old Indic gābhasti- ‘forearm, hand’; to Lithuanian gabana ‘armful’, Old Irish gabaid ‘takes, grasps’, later ‘gets’, Latin habĕre ‘to have, hold, possess’.

Old Indic grābhā- ‘what can be grasped’, τρᾶ-glābha- ‘handful of grass’ (< *g̣rebh₂; to Hittite kar(ap)- ‘to lift’, Old Indic grabhāti, Young Avestan gahabnāiti ‘seizes’).


Middle Irish glacc ‘half-opened fist, hand’ (< Pre-Proto-Celtic *g̣f̣knā with phonetic change from *kn > kk or sound-symbolic/expressive gemination), Modern Irish glac; to Modern Irish glacaim ‘to grasp’; Old English clyccan ‘to seize, grasp’.


Greek Homeric ἄγοστος ‘the hand bent for grasping’ (only in the formulaic vers ἔλε γαίαν ἄγοστοι ‘take the earth with the hand (bent like a

55 Duchesne-Guillemin 1938: 219; IEW 408; EWAia I: 463f.
56 EWAia I: 505f.; LIV 201.
57 Schindler 1972: 61f., 82f.; Klingenschmitt 1982: 177; Neri 2013: 190; but cf. LIV 188f. (two different roots). Neri (2013: 190f.) mentions an alternative etymology: *g̣ṿMicrosoft Word - 205* őỵḥo- ‘the crooked’ (to Greek γυνοι ‘limb, hand’).
58 Lühr 1985: 289f.
59 Ułaszyn 1910: 201f.
claw’) [Λ 425] probably < *ἀγορ-στός with ρ-loss like for example in παστάς, -άδος ‘extension, columned hall, atrium’ (< *παρ-στάς) and suffix -στο- like in Greek παλαστή ‘flat hand’, Old Church Slavonic граба ‘handful’; to Greek ἄγειρω ‘to gather’

Old Irish dorn ‘fist, hand’, Modern Welsh dwrn ‘hand’ (Modern Welsh dyrnod, Middle Welsh dyrnawt ‘slap in the face’), dyrnawt (Middle Welsh dyrnawit) ‘handful’, Brythonic dorn ‘hand’, (Brythonic dornek ‘who has got big hands’), Latvian dure, dūris ‘fist’; to Latvian duru, dūrū, dūrt ‘to stab, push’

Latin pugnus ‘fist’; to Latin pungō ‘stab, push’

Following meaning features are more general:

‘the doing’

Old Indic kará- ‘hand, elephant’s trunk’; to Old Indic kará- ‘doing, making’

‘the working’

Middle Irish scip ‘hand’ (Middle Irish cip probably < deisscip ‘right hand’) (with bb in expressive function or < *skebbni-); to Proto-Germ. *skapja- ‘to work’ (with secondary *p?)

Meaning features that actually correspond to our word for “hand” today:

Gothic handus, Old Norse hond, Old Saxon hand, Old Frisian hand, hond, Old English hand, hond, OHG, MHG, Old Low Franconian, Middle Dutch hant, OHG Isidor hant-ɡriffa ‘pugillus’, Modern Dutch hand, NHG Hand; to Gothic fra-hinpan ‘to take prisoner’, Old Swedish, Modern Swedish hinna ‘to reach’, Gothic hunps, Old English hūd, OHG -hunda, -hunta ‘prey’, Greek κεντέω ‘to stab’ < Proto-IE *kent- ‘to

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61 IEW 203 (to the connection with the root *dēr- ‘to hold’; Mühlenbach/Endzelin I: 529; Buck 1949: 239.

62 Cf. further Old Icelandic hreift ‘wrist, a seal’s fin’; to Old Icelandic hreifa ‘to swing’, Lithuanian kreipútis, kreipti and kraipāti, kraipyti ‘to twist, turn’ (IEW 937).

63 To Proto-IE *kēr- ‘to make, shape’, originally ‘to cut’, perhaps to denote a no longer determinable craft activity.

64 Lühr 1985: 318; but IEW 931 to Latin scabō, -ere, scăbē ‘to shave, scrape, rub’, Old Icelandic skafa ‘to scrape, shave, plane’.

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stab', 65 Old English *hunta ‘hunter, spider’, *hentan ‘to pursue’ (with the
continuant of secondary Proto-Germ. *t) 66

These Germanic cognates as well as the function of the human hand as a
grasping organ indicate that the Germanic source word for the naming hand
changed its meaning from *t to stab* to ‘to grasp’. The hand would then be charac-
terised as ‘the grasper’. It would be based on a nomen actionis ‘grasping’
(*kont-), that developed into a nomen agentis metonymically. 67

Moreover, the hand as an expression for a concrete grasping gesture is the
meaning aspect that is applied for the very oldest word for “hand” in Indo-
European:

Proto-IE *gʰes-ôr/τ-: Hittite kessar (commune, neutrum), dative-locative
kisri, keššaraš (with thematic extension), 68 Luwian iššar- ‘hand’, Lycian
išri- (with loss of the tectal in the onset), 69 Greek xeîp, xερπος, Armenian
jeṙn (*gʰesr-), Tocharian A tsar (*gʰesor or *gʰesêr), B šar (*gʰeserV'),
Armenian jeṙn (*gʰesr-), Albanian dorê ‘hand’ 70 (rebuilt from an acc. sg.
*dʰeran (transp. trat *gʰesrîn); 71 *gʰos -to-: Old Indic hâsta- ‘hand, upper

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65 LIV 326f.
66 EWA IV 816f.; Lühr 2000: 186; Buck 1949: 239; Lehmann 1986: 184, 187; Seebold 1970:
255; 1975: 166f. (‘point’ > ‘fist’ > ‘hand’). Another remarkable etymology is suggested by Neri
2003: 226ff.: He connects Gothic handus to the root of OHG dégen ‘to implore’, dihan ‘to
thrive, adjust’ by reconstructing an aorist participle *t-k-ônt- (compare the word formation
*gʰ-dônt- ‘biting’), whereby the accusative-kont- was transferred to an n-stem in Germanic.
Compared with this Jensen’s (1952: 50ff.) derivation of Gothic handus from a compound formed
with the numeral for ‘ten’ (*dekû) and the root *h₁em- ‘to take’ + suffix -t- ‘two handfuls’ is
unacceptable as well as Kisch’s (1935: 137) reconstruction *kont- ‘(one) hand’, literally ‘five
fingers’ (as a counterpart to Hungarian kész ‘hand’ etc.).
This also applies for Devleeschouwer’s (1974: 130ff.) assumption, that Gothic -hinpan and
handus are a contamination of a Proto-Indo-European root *kent- ‘to pierce’ (OHG hantag
‘sharp, acute’) with the family of Hungarian kész ‘hand’ (< *kâte ‘grip’) or Wagner’s (1972: 76f.)
connection with Uralic words. The Pre-Proto-Germanic alternation -r/-d- in Gothic handus und
-hinpan and Old English hunta ‘hunter, spider’ is not comparable to the consonant gradation
found in Uralic languages. It is rather due to n-germination in Germanic (Lühr 1988: 270).
70 The connection with Greek δόχος ‘palm, hand span (measure of length)’ (to Old Norse tæra,
terra ‘to spread’, IEW 203) cannot be maintained.
71 Neri 2013: 186.
arm’, 72 Old Avestan, Young Avestan zasta- ‘hand’, Old Persian dasta- ‘hand’; Latin praestō ‘present, at hand’ (*prah₂-i-gʰ-os-tōd), Lithuanian žāstas ‘upper arm’, Lithuanian pažastis ‘armpit, space under the arm’73

Rix (1991) assumed that there used to be a verbal root with the meaning ‘to grasp (with the hollow hand)’, which only survived in nominal formations for individual languages,74 in the Indo-European word for ‘thousand’, *gʰes-l-ih₂- (Latin mīlle), *gʰes-l-(ii)lo- (Vedic in sahāsra-, Young Avestan in hazagre- ‘thousand’ [with *sa-<*sm-?], χῖλαοι ‘thousand’). This word points to a term for the ‘hollow hand’, when it really meant ‘having a hand’, i.e. ‘to have an amount (of grains) that fits into the hollow hand’, in the connection *smih₂ gʰes-l-ih₂.75 A further connection was suggested by Eichner (2002) referring to Latin hostus ‘quantity of oil which was obtained in one working day compared to the used quantity of olives’ < **compensation, substitute’, hostia ‘sacrificial animal’ < *‘female animal, that serves as a symbolic substitute’. As Neri76 points out, the basic meaning of words for ‘hand’ formed by the root *gʰes- would then be ‘the one who takes and gives’.77 However, this meaning was not known to the speakers of Indo-European anymore because of the lack of a corresponding word family. With this we have come to the end of our etymological analysis of the word “hand” within its semantic field.

5 Conclusion

The focus was on the “Benennungsmotive” of the words for “hand” in Germanic and therefore the etymology of the semantic field of this multifaceted basic concept. The history of these words showed that new creations, with meanings that were not opaque, arose and replaced the synchronically unmotivated words. If

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74 LIN 170ff.
75 Rix 1991; Neri 2013: 188f.
76 Neri 2013: 189.
77 As Neri (2013: 198f.) convincingly shows, the word for “hand” originally was a root noun; cf. further the derivation *gʰestō- ‘being in the hand’ → *gʰōst-i- ‘the one who is in the hand, in the protection, guest’ (Latin hostis).
one starts with Proto-Indo-European, the opposing pole of present-day German, one can see that this language already possessed an unmotivated word *gʰes-r- ‘hand’, probably in the meaning ‘the one who takes and gives’ and in the word for ‘thousand’ for the denotation of the ‘hollow hand’. On the contrary, the etymologically transparent word IE *pʰ₁h₂-mah₂-, Greek παλάμη, Latin palma, and *pʰ₂h₂-māh₂-, Old Irish lám, stands for the ‘flat, open hand’ (cf. Latin plānus). However, the continuation OHG folma, used as a measure of length, is unmotivated in Germanic and has therefore been replaced by clearer words. Another archaic word is OHG Bavarian, Alemannic tenar ‘flat hand’, which is related to Hittite and Greek words. Competitors are the measure of length terms OHG spanna, breta, flazza and laffa, lappo. While these words also did not survive in German in the course of time, the term for the ‘open hand’ prevailed in Bavarian Gaufel to date. Furthermore, there were also new namings of words that were concerned with the aspect of the right or left hand as the favourable or skilful as the unmotivated formations OHG wini(s)star, MHG winster(e), Austro-Bavarian tengge, tenke ‘left hand’ as opposed to the motivated OHG lenka ‘left hand’ (MHG link, lenk), Bavarian, Alemannic letze ‘left hand’. However, there was next to no need for these words in present-day language, as well as for the metaphorically used OHG munt ‘hand, protection’. Special bearings of the hand are denoted solely by OHG füst ‘fist’ or by constructions like NHG flache, offene Hand, Handfläche, which function as stereotypes for “hand” today. Functional aspects of the hand like in the cultural term ‘the grasping one’ are not relevant for people nowadays. Nevertheless, this still occurs in Yiddish and in other Germanic and Indo-European languages. In general, we are neutral towards the hand today. At most a certain feeling of the speaker finds expression in slightly derogatory words for the hand or in imitating the sounds as children’s speech, as can be seen in the comparisons with expressions stemming from denotations of body parts of animals like Flosse (‘fin’), Pfote (‘paw’) or the children’s speech Patsche (Patschhand ‘paddy’). All in all, the etymology of the semantic field shows the development of the hand as an existential instrument for mastering one’s surrounding world to a neutral limb, that finds little reflection in modern life.
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