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The Story of *History*:
Semantic Shift in the Language of Thought in Early English

Breal's *Semantics: Studies in the Science of Meaning* (1900) laid the foundation for modern work on semantic change, establishing such concepts as specialization, narrowing, and pejoration. Two decades later, Saussure (1916) introduced the concept of semantic fields, which led to Trier's (1931) work on pejoration in Germanic terms for INTELLECT. Traugott (2001) discusses the development of this tradition at great length in her work on the "predictable paths" of semantic change.

In this paper, I describe the impact of Greco-Latin terms from the domain of INTELLECT on English, showing a semantic shift in the Germanic vocabulary that preexisted the classical borrowings. A regular pattern emerges where Greco-Latin vocabulary for academic disciplines were borrowed or coined, while general OE terms for knowledge, such as *weird* and *cunning*, lost ground and took on a negative (or at least marginalized) connotation. A particularly clear example of this can be seen in the native vocabulary displaced by the introduction of the word *history* into English. Older OE words, which had taken up a similar semantic space, either disappeared or took on less prestigious uses.

Like *mathematics*, from the Greek *mathema*, *history* as an academic specialty developed from a general INTELLECT term, the semantic extension of which is very easy to trace from its origin as the title of Herodotus' "investigation" of the origins of the Persian War. The popularity and prestige of the narrative spawned a new literary genre, and the new meaning accompanied *historia*'s borrowing into Latin and subsequently into English.

The semantic narrowing of *wit* and *wisdom*, two Germanic cognates of *historia*, reflects the patterned change undergone by Germanic intellectual vocabulary. The same process can be seen in rough synonyms of *historia*, such as *gewyrd* (an OE form of *weird*), which has cognates in Old Saxon, Old High German, and Old Norse. An early gloss for *historia*, OE *weird* was connected to the idea of history, but also indicated a "principle," "power," or "agency" that determined the course of one's life. Alfred's translation of Boethius (888) defines *weird* as "God's work that he does each day." Around 725, *weird* is equated with the Latin *Parcae*, or "Fates," the three goddesses who spun, measured, and cut the threads of human life, and this usage is attested until 1855. Alfred uses *weird* to translate the Latin *fortuna* as well as *historia*, with an intertwining of the ideas of personal and impersonal forces controlling human life.

The semantic shift of *weird* can be traced though the early ME period up to the present day. In PDE, of course, only a pejorative usage survives, with a supernatural denotation for *weird* being last attested in 1899. It is now unthinkable that *weird* could be used with a meaning of *history* or of the supernatural forces it once described. Similar, if less dramatic, shifts can be observed in other Germanic knowledge terms such as *cunning*, *craft*, and *lore*, which tended to undergo pejoration as specialized Greco-Latin vocabulary was borrowed or coined.