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NAMES FOR TUSSILAGO FARFARA L. IN ENGLISH DIALECTS

Abstract

The article sheds light on a few English names for ‘colt’s-foot; *Tussilago farfara* L.’ recorded in a number of traditional works and the SED, which offers a few names not to be found in older compilations. It focusses especially on the lexical triad *colt’s-foot*, *foalfoot*, *horsefoot* and the frequent name transfers between ‘*Tussilago farfara* L., colt’s-foot’ and ‘*Arctium lappa* L., burdock.’ The study points out a few practical problems involved in the historical investigation of plant-names.

1. Introductory Remarks

Plant-names have always been a popular subject for onomasiologists, although studying plant-names in a historical perspective is not always an easy task. Although many motives for a certain designation, so-called iconyms, are based on the appearance, use, location or time of blossom of a plant, the evolution of many designations are still unclear despite comprehensive and comparatistic analyses such as the ones by Heinrich Marzell (HM), whose dictionary of German plant-names is also a valuable source for English onomasiologists. The study will first present a few rather safe etymologies and on the background of these try to offer solutions for a few problematic cases. We will also see if we can draw some general conclusion for onomasiological studies. Our forms for *Tussilago farfara* L. have been taken from various sources: apart from the OED we can specifically refer to Bierbaumer (1975, 1976, 1979)¹ and the TOE for Old English and to BrittHoll (cf. the index on p. 615), the EDD and the SED² (item II.2.7.), which has so far hardly been used for onomasiological studies, for Modern English dialects. In addition, Majut (1998: 73ff.) has provided us with valuable information on some names for *Tussilago farfara* in English, German and other languages.

2. Names with Clear Etymology and Iconymy

2.1. According to Marzell (HM IV: 851) already Pliny, in his *Natural History*, noted the effect of the plant against cough. For this reason the Romans called the plant “cough-plant” (Lat. *tussis* ‘cough’ plus a suffix *-(l)ago*). The same iconymic structure is represented in English by *coughwort*, literally “cough-wort” (first attested in 1597) (OED s.v. *cough*, BrittHoll). Likewise, this medical use of the plant appears to hide behind the name *british tobacco* (HM IV: 381).

2.2. That the plant was also used to cover and cure boils and sores (cf. HM IV: 864s.) is verbalized in forms with an iconymic structure “canker (+ flower/weed)” (cf. SED E 21Nf [Norfolk]³).

¹ However, only Bierbaumer (1979) has relevant information on *Tussilago farfara*.

² The further notation will indicate the region (N = Northern Counties, W = West Midland Counties etc.), the number and acronym for the county and finally the number for the locality, whose name I will add in brackets.

³ Under *canker* and *canker-weed* the EDD (I: 505f.) already listed several plant-names, but not *Tussilago*.

2.3. Due to the plant's hoof-shaped leaves a number of words represent an iconym "horse/ass/swine + foot = hoof": *horse-foot* (first attested 1597) (OED, EDD, SED, BrittHoll, Majut 1998: 84), *ass's-foot* (BrittHoll), and *sow-foot* (BrittHoll), *horse-hoof* (first identifiable as *Tussilago farfara* in 1562 [cf. sub 3.2.]) (OED, EDD, Majut 1998: 84) or simply *hoofs* (BrittHoll, Majut 1998: 84). The iconymic type "horse etc. + foot" is also visible in German and Medieval Latin names (cf. HM IV: 851ff.). Furthermore, the big size of the leaves is the basis for the iconym "battering leaves", which is reflected in the type *batter-docks* (cf. SED W 12St [Staffordshire]⁴). In connection with *horse-hoof*, Majut (1998: 85) reports that the common folk views the name *horse-hooves* for 'caltha palustris' just as a variant of the former, since *Caltha palustris* and *Tussilago farfara* share also other names (e.g. E.dial. *foalfoot* and G.dial. *Fohlenfuß*). Majut (1998: 84f.), though, thinks that *hooves* represents a different etymon than *hoof*, as the plural of *hoof* is *hoofs*; according to him *hooves* is related to the verb *heave* and denotes a horse disease (ModE *heaves*). However, *hooves* is a frequent and also standard plural variant of *hoof* so that Majut's hypothesis is unnecessary (cf. also Grzega 2001: 282)—especially since there is also a variant *horse-hove* for *Tussilago farfara* (BrittHoll).

2.4. Forms showing the structure "son-before-the-father" (BrittHoll) can be explained on the fact that the blossoms ("sons") appear before the leaves ("father") (cf. HM IV: 861). The type serves also as a name for *Petasites vulgaris*.

2.5. Moreover, there are a number of (in part folk-etymological) mis- and re-interpretations of the Latin *tussilago*: *dtʃɪlagɪ* (SED N 1Nb 2 [Embleton]); *dishalaga* (BrittHoll), *tushylucky gowan* (BrittHoll), *tushalan* (BrittHoll). Further variants are attested in the EDD (II: 89).

2.6. Finally, we can observe a rather large number of name transfers due to some similarity between *Tussilago farfara* and another plant. The hapax form *ka:kɪ* (SED E 21Nf 2 [Great Snoring]: <cockle>) is glossed in BrittHoll as 'Lychnis githago L.; Arctium lappa L.; Lolium temulentum'. To me the transfer seems to have happened from *Arctium lappa* (burdock) to *Tussilago farfara* (colt's-foot), as both plants served to lap butter (cf. HM IV: 851). This view is corroborated by some German dialect forms (cf. HM IV: 851). The shifts, or confusions, between *Arctium lappa* and *Tussilago farfala* are actually quite frequent, as shall be seen presently (cf. 3.1. and 3.2.). Some Southern dialectal instances of *mugwort* (SED S 36Co 4 & 6-7 [St. Ewe, St. Buryan, Mullion]: *mɔgwɔ̃ːt̪ ~ mɔgwɔ̃ːt̪̥*) show a transfer from 'Artemisia vulgaris L.; Artemisia Absinthium L.'. The basis for the confusion is that the leaves are green on their upper sides and white on the other (due to the tiny hairs). The OED also mentions a form *hogweed*, but the identification as 'Tussilago farfara' does not suggest itself from the forms recorded. BrittHoll record it as the name for *Tussilago* in Yorkshire. It was originally reserved to *Heraclum Sphondylium* L., *Polygonum aviculare* L., *Sonchus arvensis* L., and *Torilis anthriscus* L. The motivation for this transfer is still to be resolved.

⁴ The EDD (I: 188) notes that some dialects also have *butter-dock* "from its leaves being used for lapping butter".

⁵ The EDD (IV: 195) only gives 'Artemisia vulgaris.'

3. Names with Assumedly [!] Clear Etymology and/or Iconymy

3.1. The type *klīt* <cleat> (SED, EDD I: 687⁶), OE *clite* (TOE 110) is the oldest attested English name for *Tussilago farfara* (it is nowadays sometimes to *Petasites vulgaris* as well) (cf. also the parallel German developments listed in HM (IV: 851ff.). To this type the SED hapax forms *tlv̄əts* (SED N 6Y 15 [Pateley Bridge]) and *kl̄təks* (SED N 6Y 27 [Carleton]) must belong; both northern forms, they can be seen as the results of assimilations. The AEW and the OED word relate the Old English word to Latv. *glīdēt*, but refrain from giving any further explanation. A root variant is said to hide behind the type *clot(e)* (OED s.v. *clote*, BrittHoll s.v. *clot*), which in Old English (OE *clāte*) refers to *Arctium lappa* L., a plant with which *Tussilago farfara* seems often confused with (cf. above and also HM IV: 851). Therefore the IEW attaches both Old English words, *clite* (probably not with the long *ī* that the IEW suggests, as only *ī* can explain ME <e>) and *clāte*, to the root *glei-d-* ‘to stick’.

3.2. Let us now turn to the most frequent forms for *Tussilago farfara* in modern English dialects. From a purely formal point of view the forms *colt's-foot* (first identifiable as *Tussilago farfara* in 1552) (OED, SED, BrittHoll), *foal-foot* (first identifiable as *Tussilago farfara* in 1578) (SED, Majut 1998: 2, BrittHoll, EDD II: 433)⁷, including the subtypes *couffit* (BrittHoll) and *foilefoot* (BrittHoll) go back to an iconymic structure that appears to parallel the lexical typ *horse-foot*. And this is the current view (cf. OED, Majut 1998: 73). The view could indeed be supported by the Scandinavian forms Dan. *folefod* and Swed. *fålafötter* and by Low German forms (cf. Majut 1998: 87f., HM IV: 853). Nevertheless, one should ask (as Majut already did) why not the generic form, but the form for the young was selected by the speakers. Was there an additional motivation? As a general rule, plant-names motivated by a comparison to an animal or the body-part of an animal seem to take the generic animal term. If the specific name for the male, the castrate male, the female or the young is selected, it can be expected that the iconym is connected with the specific features of these members of the respective animal family. Thus male animals in plant-names often express that something in the plant looks like horns. Sometimes plant-names based on male animal terms stand in opposition to similarly looking plants based on female animal terms in order to express just size differences. This can easily be checked by comparing respective entries in BrittHoll. But what can be the motivation for choosing the young horse to denote *Tussilago*? Although the Scandinavian and Low German forms suggest that “foal-foot” is West Germanic heritage, we have no clue that the English type *foal-foot* existed before the 15th century. As to *colt*-forms we have a hapax form, which Kindschi (1955: 118), Bierbaumer (1979: 58) and the OEC give as *cologræig*, which glosses Lat. *caballopodia uel ungula caballi* and which Kindschi, Bierbaumer and the TOE interpret as

⁶ The EDD and the MED list several plants under *cleat* (and *clēte* respectively), among them *Arctium lappa*, but not *Tussilago farfara*.

⁷ The earlier 1400 quotation from *Archaeologia* (cf. OED) reads: “Folesfoth & ye smale clote is all on.” From this an identification of the term as *Tussilago farfara* is not possible; the juxtaposition with the formally unrelated *clote* makes it even rather improbable. The formations *coltesfot* and *folesfot* may actually be still earlier, maybe earlier than 1373. But the quotation that the MED gives for both (and *horsehove*) doesn't allow an entirely clear identification as *Tussilago farfara*: “pes pulli agrestis: Horshove, folefote, coltisfote; this erbe is grene in that on eside and white in that oper.” The description would unfortunately also apply to *Arctium lappa*. As far as *pes pulli (agrestis)* is concerned, Grigson (1974: 55) says that this was the Medieval Latin term for *Tussilago farfara*, but he apparently the date he gives for the form *coltsfoot* is the 16th-century. Map 129 of the WGE shows that today *foal-foot* is basically current in the dialects of the extreme north and the north-eastern part of England; the rest of England uses *colt's-foot*.

*coltgræg*⁸. But we cannot be sure that these referred to *Tussilago*. As Majut (1998: 79) shows, Lat. *ungula caballina* referred to *Arctium lappa* in earlier times (at least until the middle of the 13th century), not to *Tussilago farfara*. Consequently, *foal-foot* and *colt's-foot* both seem to be lexical innovations for *Tussilago farfara* in the 16th century (just like *horse-foot* and *horse-hoof*, the latter of which originally referred to *Arctium lappa*, too). And they may both represent transfers from other plants, particularly *Arctium lappa*. It may well be that *horse-foot*, *colt's-foot*, *foal-foot* strengthened each other mutually. The history may have been roughly as follows:

- (1) OE *clīte* 'Tussilago farfara' vs. OE *clāte* (aside from *foal-foot*, *horse-hoof*⁹ and others) 'Arctium lappa'
- (2) onomasiological fuzziness: plants have similar features plus similar names
- (3) mixture not only of OE *clīte* (ME *clēte*) and OE *clāte* (ME *clōte*), but also of other synonyms for the two plants
- (4) The term *foal-foot* triggers off an iconymically parallel construction *colt's-foot*. (It may be asked whether *colt-* was additionally motivated by the similar sounding *clote*, but so far I haven't found any metathesized form of *clote*.)

3.3. Since we said that generic animal names are selected for plant-names if no sex-specific feature is the underlying iconym we should also comment on *bullfoot* (first attested 1562) (OED s.v. *bull*, BrittHoll) and Scott. *cowheave* (first recorded in the 19th century) (BrittHoll, EDD I: 754). Obviously, the generic terms, ME *retheren* ~ *rotheren* and *catel* (a Northern French loan), were possibly not basic enough in everyday speech; the quotations in the MED (s.v. *catel* and *rother*) show that *catel* was a rather technical term (comparable to ModE *livestock*) and that *rother* was mostly used as a collective noun in the plural. Therefore speakers fell back on the male and female designations (not on the names for the castrate and the young though!). Maybe, *bullfoot* was created as a parallel coinage to *cowfoot* 'Senecio Jacobaea' (BrittHoll), which, as the EDD (I: 506) informs us, was also used as a "canker-weed" (cf. supra). According to Majut (1998: 86) the morpheme *-heave* may represent a corruption of *hoof*. It is hardly imaginable that *hoof* was replaced by *heave* without any gain or exchange in motivation. Maybe there is a folk-etymological connection with *heave* 'to utter (a groan, sigh, or sob [...] with effort, or with a deep breath, which causes the chest to heave; [...] to make an effort to vomit, to retch' (cf. OED s.v. *heave*), since it has been observed that, due to the gold-colored blossoms, *Tussilago farfara* is given the cows as fodder so that they produce better and more milk, but that they actually refuse to eat it (cf. HM IV: 859 & 866).

3.4. The form *colt-herb* (BrittHoll) is a hapax form and seems to be a derivate of *colt(s)foot*.

3.5. Forms of the iconym "cock/craw + foot" (SED, EDD I: 682 & 816, BrittHoll s.v. *Cock-foot* and *Cock's-foot* 'Chelidonium maius L.; Aquilegia vulgaris L.; Dactylis glomerata L. '; s.v. *Craw-foot* 'Ranunculus acris L.; Ranunculus repens L. ') clearly goes

⁸ Bierbaumer thinks that it is possible that the form is a corruption of *coltmægl*, which then represented a loan translation (better: loan rendering) of *ungulla caballi*. This, however, forces us to assume too many misspellings of the original word.

⁹ Majut says that explaining the formation of *foal-foot* by the appeal of alliteration cannot be substantiated by chronological facts. Nevertheless, the formation *horse-hoof* (coined two centuries prior to *horse-foot*, then still glossing 'ungula caballina') as well as the French dialect type *pied de poulain* and the Engadine type *pei pulein* (cf. HM IV: 853) corroborates the theory that euphony, or better: sound play, had its share in the development, since from a purely semantic-encyclopedic view the comparison with a cock's foot doesn't make sense.

back to name transfers, since the leaves do not look like the foot of a cock or a crow. The confusion with the *Ranunculus* terms is clear as they share the yellow blossoms with *Tussilago farfara*. What the above-given referents of *cock's-foot* should have in common with *Tussilago farfara*, however, is unclear to me.

3.6. The second part in the form *clatter-clogs* (BrittHoll) can easily be understood as a metaphor (as with the items in *-foot* and *-hoof*). The first item may have been added because of the rather huge leaves (in relation to the rest of the plant) and the sound they may make in the wind on stony grounds where the plant frequently grows (cf. supra 2.3.: *batter docks*).

3.7. The form *ptsbēdz* (SED W 12St 2 [Mow Cop]) is originally a term for the dandelion (BrittHoll s.v. *Pissabed* 'Leontodon Taraxacum L.; Ranunculus bulbosus L.), coined after Fr. *pissenlit* (cf. OED s.v. *pissabed*, EDD IV: 523f.). The transfer to *Tussilago farfara* is not unexpected if one takes the many parallel developments in German dialects (cf. HM IV: 859 & 872f.) into account.

3.8. The plant's typical location is said to be the motivation behind the type *clayweed* (first attested 1878) (OED s.v. *clay*, BrittHoll s.v. *clayweed*, cf. also HM IV: 862), "[f]rom its partiality to clay soils," as BrittHoll write. Unfortunately, neither the OED nor BrittHoll give any indications as to the geographical distribution of this type. If it belongs to the central dialects it is, in my view, equally imaginable that *clay* 'hoof' (cf. EDD) is the determining element of the compound, ergo "hoof-weed" (cf. the German dialect forms according to HM [IV: 851f.]). The entry *clayt*, which BrittHoll only link to *cleats*, should actually be seen as a folk-etymological blend of *cleat* and *clay(weed)* in my opinion.

3.9. For instance, there seems to be confusion between *Tussilago farfara* and *Rumex* plants because both are used to lap butter (cf. HM IV: 851, EDD I: 188). This can explain the formation *dove dock* (BrittHoll s.v. *Dove-dock*, OED s.v. *dock*), which is based on *dock* 'Rumex'. The choice of *dove* as a determinant looks indeed striking at first, as nothing of *Tussilago farfara* reminds the speaker of a dove. The problem may be resolvable if depart from a euphony-induced formation (cf. supra ann. 9). But if we take into account the term seems to be Scottish English rather than English English, then one can image the Scottish stem *dove* 'stupid, foolish' as it occurs, e.g. in *dovened* 'benumbed with cold' (cf. Warrack/Grant s.v.), in it—then the word *dovened* may make us think of *Tussilago farfara* as a plant against cough. To prove this, however, we will have to wait for more profound knowledge of historical Scots.

4. Names with Unclear Etymology and Iconymy

There remain a few hapax legomena listed in the SED, BrittHoll and/or the TOE, which we shall briefly comment on.

4.1. The form *skøʌlføt* (SED W 17Wa 1 [Nether Whitacre]) seems to be caused by a metathesis of the "genitive" *s* in *col[t]s-foot* to the front of the word. The form *ka':tʃfət* (SED W 11Sa 9 [Clun]) seems to be another purely phonetically aberrant variant of *colt's-foot*, where the vocalization, or deletion, of pre-vocalic *l*, was followed by an erroneous insertion of an *r*.

4.2. The form *kəʊstl* (SED N 5La 12 [Harwood]), which the SED gives as <coosil> in the

entry line, is etymologically very unclear. Does the first element represent *cow*? Is the second element an old diminutive suffix?

4.3. The form *kle:ps* (SED E 9Nt 2 [Chuckney]) can represent a variant of *cleats*, but it is unclear how the change from *-t(s)-* to *-p(s)-* can be accounted for. The editor of the SED view it as an error of the informant.

4.4. In the appendix BrittHoll list a form *dummy weed* (BrittHoll). This form may be related to *dunnies*, a name for *Petasites vulgaris* (BrittHoll), with which *Tussilago* is often confused (cf. HM IV: 851), as has already been shown above. The form *dummy* must be a later folk-etymological change.

4.5. The form *baki* (SED S 31So 9 [Brompton Regis]), which the SED transcribe as <backy> in the headline, must be the dialectal word *backy* ‘tobacco,’ which the EDD (I: 122) records for the same county (Somersetshire), as *Tussilago* served as a supplement for tobacco to heal cough problems.

5. Final Remarks

The study has shown that the SED, which has not yet attracted the onomasiological interest it deserves, has contributed a number of interesting words for our concept. due to a richer material and a cross-linguistic comparison of iconyms we have been able to shed better light on some of the names for the colt’s-foot. But at the end we may wonder if, in a way, this brief article has not aroused more problems than it solved. We can at least state the following things, which have in part already been observed by other linguists, too. A list of clear iconyms (also from other languages!) can help to understand forms that have so far been unexplained (here *dummy weed* and *backy*). It has to be made sure, though, that the concrete forms really stand for the assumed iconyms. In onomasiological and iconymic studies, a “generic” horse can have the same value as a “generic” cow, but does frequently not have the same value as a “specific” colt. Huge problems are the many name transfers, which may happen even if the transfer is from an iconymic perspective visibly illogical (here *dove dock* and *crawfoot*). On the other hand, unless folk-etymology is involved, which happens not infrequently, such visibly illogical iconymies make it probable that a name transfer must have occurred. In many other instances the researcher can no longer be sure whether a name has been transferred (either non-intentionally by a lack of knowledge on behalf of the speakers [we could term this “onomasiological fuzziness”] or intentionally by speakers’ classifying two plants as sub-variants of one and the same plant in their folk-taxonomy) or whether speakers came accidentally (and independently) up with the same iconym for two different plants. Moreover, historical onomasiologists have to face the problem that it is not always clear which plant a specific name in an historical document refers to, even if a definition is given (e.g. with *colt’sfoot*, *foalfoot*, *horsefoot*). All in all, this brief article has shown that etymological suggestions for plant-names must be given with more caution than for lexemes from many other conceptual fields.

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