The Name of Achilles: Questions of Etymology and "Folk-Etymology"

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In his book on the language of the Linear B tablets, Leonard R. Palmer explained the etymology of the name of Achilles, 'Αχιλλαύος, as a shortened variant of a compound formation *Akhílauos, built from the roots of άχος, "grief," and of λαός, "host of fighting men, folk," morphologically parallel to such "Caland" compounds as Homeric κονδί-άνειται and Οίδι-πόδης. The posited morphological shortening from *Akhílauos to 'Αχιλλαύος, with optional doubling of the last consonant in the shortened variant, is paralleled by such forms as Χαιρί-λαος and Χάριλλαος (cf. also Φυλεύος vs. Φιλλαύος). What follows is a brief reassessment of Palmer’s explanation, in the wake of over thirty years of intermittent debate.

In my own work on the name of Achilles, I agreed with Palmer’s reconstruction of *Akhílauos, offering further evidence on the two distinct levels of linguistics and poetics. The linguistic evidence was primarily morphological, with a few additions to the examples already adduced by Palmer. The poetic evidence came mainly from the formulaic system attested in the Dichtersprache of the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey.


First of all, we may note that the noun ἄχος, "grief," is a functional synonym of πένθος, "grief," in the Homeric Dichtersprache; for example, the personal grief of Achilles over Briseis is ἄχος at II. 1. 188, 16. 52, 55 and πένθος at 1. 362; his grief over Patroklos is ἄχος at 18. 22, 23. 47 and πένθος at 18. 73; likewise, the collective grief of the Achaeans is ἄχος at 16. 22 and πένθος at 9. 3. This thematic parallelism between ἄχος and πένθος is pertinent, I argued, to the morphological parallelism between Palmer's reconstructed "Caland" compounds *Ακη-λαιός and *Πενθηλαιός, matching respectively the shortened "Caland" forms 'Αχιλλ(ι)εύς and Πένθιλαος. Second, I argued at length that the poetical evidence of the Homeric Dichtersprache reveals "a pervasive nexus" between ἄχος and 'Αχιλ(λ)εύς, which is "integrated in the inherited formulaic system and hence deeply rooted in the epic tradition."

This statement is quoted, with approval, by Gary B. Holland, who then goes on to summarize my overall interpretation of the Iliad along the lines of this etymology:

It also seems clear that Achilles' actions (or lack of action) lead to ἄχος for the host of fighting men. In Nagy's formula, Achilles' ἄχος leads to Achilles' μῆνις leads to ἄχος of the Achaeans. Furthermore, while the Trojans appear to be winning, that is, while they have the κράτος "power," the Achaeans have ἄχος... Thus, the thematic associations of ἄχος and λαός with the name of Achilles provide further corroboration for the etymology proposed by Palmer.

Despite his agreement on the level of poetics, Holland has two objections on the level of linguistics. First, he suggests that the thematic nexus between ἄχος and 'Αχιλ(λ)εύς may be a matter of "folk-etymology," not etymology: "The preponderance of ἄχος and its derivatives may simply be due to a folk-etymological association of the word with the name of Achilles on the part of the epic poet(s), and not to an actual etymological connection" (emphasis mine). Second, he suggests that my translation of the "Caland" compound *Ακη-λαιός, "whose λαός has ἄχος," "seems wrong for this compound type," because "dependent noun compounds are

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5 Nagy, Best of the Achaeans (above, note 3) 94; cf. “The Name of Achilles” (above, note 3) 221.
7 Nagy, Best of the Achaeans (above, note 3) 79.
9 Holland (previous note) 22–23.
used very infrequently as the basis for bahuvrīhi or possessive adjective compounds.”

It is easier to begin with the second objection, if I am right in thinking that it is based on a misunderstanding. All along, I interpreted the reconstructed “Caland” compound *Akhī-lāyos as “whose host of fighting men is sorrowful [= grieving],” where the syntactical function of the first component is indeed that of an adjective.11 Intending to convey a diathetical neutrality in the adjectival component, which I am here rendering as “sorrowful [= grieving],” I devised the translation, “whose lāyos [λαός] has ákhos [ἀχος = sorrow, grief].”12 Similar translations can be applied to other “Caland” compounds, as with κυδι-άνειρο, “whose men are κυδροῖ,” that is, “whose men have κυδοῦς”; also, Οἰδι-πόδης, “whose feet are swollen,” that is, “whose feet have swelling = ὀδος” (in this case, the “Caland” simplex with suffix -ρός, alternate of the compound formant οἰδι-, is not attested).

Holland’s second objection raises a more important question, which is central to this presentation: how to distinguish an etymology from a “folk-etymology.” The latter term is misleading, I suggest, if it leads to the assumption that the only “genuine” etymology in comparative linguistics is one where a given reconstructed form can be traced all the way back to the parent language of the given languages being compared. According to such an assumption, a reconstruction like *Akhī-lāyos would be a “false” etymology if it cannot be traced back to “proto-Indo-European.”

The term “folk-etymology” implies another, even more misleading, assumption: that any etymologically “wrong” derivation of one given form from another is purely a synchronic phenomenon. True, a functioning or living connection between a given set of forms that had once been unconnected must be assumed to have a starting point at some given synchrony. Still, any synchrony is destined to become, moving forward in time, simply a cross-section in the diachrony of language. As we reconstruct a given language forward in time, what may count as a “wrong” connection in an earlier cross-section can become a “right” connection in a later cross-section, from the standpoint of the evolving structure of that language. Here I refer to the classic work of Emile Benveniste on the necessity of combining synchronic with diachronic methods in the establishment of etymologies.13

10 Holland (above, note 8) 23, with reference to Nagy, Best of the Achaeans (above, note 3) 69–70.
11 Cf. Nagy, Best of the Achaeans (above, note 3) 78, “he who has the host of fighting men grieving.”
12 Nagy, Best of the Achaeans (above, note 3) 69–70. By “diathetical neutrality,” I mean that the opposition between active and passive is neutralized.
In the case of a form like Ἀχιλ(λ)εῦς, the question is not whether it had always been connected with the forms ἅχος and λαός. What matters instead is whether this connection is “deeply rooted,” as I have described it, in the formulaic system of Homeric Dichtersprache and whether it can be traced far back enough in time to reach the remote stage when “Caland” formations were still a productive mechanism in the Greek language.

Moving diachronically forward, by the time we reach even the earliest attestations of the Greek language, we find that the “Caland” mechanism is already residual, clearly no longer productive: Only such vestiges as κυδί-άνείρα vs. κοδρός are left. What remains productive, however, as I argued, is the actual Dichtersprache that had preserved “Caland” formations like *Ακή-λαύος vs. Ἀχιλ(λ)εῦς and *Πενθί-λαυος vs. Πένθυλος.

Such a Dichtersprache, however, can be considered a system in its own right, capable of generating, analogically, such non-“Caland” formations as Χαρί-λαος vs. Χάριλλος, Σθενέ-λαος vs. Σθένελος, Νείλεως (Ionic, from *Νεκλέιος, apparently attested in the Linear B tablets as ne-e-ra-wo) vs. Νηλεύς (non-Ionic, from *Νεχλεύς), Ίόλαος vs. Ίόλη and Ίόλεια (implying a corresponding *Ιολέος), Πέριλλαος vs. Πέριλλος. Still other non-“Caland” types that could have been generated by the Dichtersprache along the lines of *Ακή-λαυος and *Πενθί-λαυος include Πρωτεσί-λαος (Il. 2. 698, etc.), Χαρεσι-λαος, Πενθεσι-λεια. With reference to Πενθεσι-λεια, Holland remarks: “Although πένθος means ‘pain’ synchronically in Greek, further connections within Indo-European are semantically difficult.” I draw attention to his use here of “synchronically,” since his purpose is to argue that seemingly related forms, such as πενθερός, “relative by marriage,” are to be derived from the Common Greek root *penth-, “bind” (as in πεισμα, “rope”; the Indo-European root is *bhendh-, as in Sanskrit bandh-), so that Πενθεσι-λεια should mean “binding the λαός” rather than “paining the λαός.”

The problem is, Holland’s use here of “synchronically” implies that there is just one level of synchrony for the meaning of “grief” or “pain”—as if any previous level would default diachronically to the meaning of “bind.” And yet, the possibility of reconstructing earlier levels of synchronicity for πένθος in the sense of “pain” becomes open-ended if the root is derived

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15 Nagy, Best of the Achaeans (above, note 3) 71.
16 Nagy, Best of the Achaeans (above, note 3) 71. On the capabilities of Homeric Dichtersprache to generate new morphological categories, see e.g. C. P. Roth, “Mixed Aorists” in Homeric Greek (New York and London 1990).
17 Holland (above, note 8) 24.
18 Holland (above, note 8) 24.
from Common Greek *k*enth-, "suffer" (cf. Lithuanian *kenčiù*, Irish *cēssaim*), as opposed to Common Greek *penth-, "bind."

It would be preferable in this case, I suggest, to keep in mind not the diachrony of the root πένθ- but also the synchronicity of a *Dichtersprache* that could generate, along with a morphological and thematic parallelism of ἀχος vs. πένθος, a morphological and thematic parallelism of *Ἀκήλ(ε)ος vs. *Πενθ(ε)λ-λαυια. These parallelisms converge in the epic tradition of a mortal combat between the male warrior *Ἀχιλλ(ε)εύς and the female warrior Πενθ(ε)σί-λεια*, as reflected in the *Aithiopis* (Proclus, summary p. 105.22 Allen).

My argument remains, then, that Palmer’s explanation of *Ἀχιλλ(ε)εύς “will not carry conviction unless we can show that the meaning of *Ἀκήλ*láuos is intrinsic to the function of Achilles in myth and epic.” In a later work, Palmer himself quoted and gave his approval to this formulation. He goes on to summarize my argument:

This poses the question of the function of ἀχος and λαός in the poetical tradition. His searching study brings out that the Leitmotiv "pain, grief, distress" recurs at key points of the developing tragedy as the μήνις of Akhilleus brought ἄλγεα on the Achaeans, as foreshadowed in the first lines of the poem. As C. H. Whitman [*Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA 1958) 182] has written, Homer handles his material in a "profoundly organic" way, "subordinating all characters to Achilles, and all incidents of the Trojan war to the Wrath." He adds that "the Wrath of Achilles had probably been an epic subject for generations when Homer found it" [ibid.].

To restate my original formulation: "The ἀχος of Achilles leads to the μήνις of Achilles leads to the ἀχος of the Achaeans." As I also argued,

19 The possibility of this derivation is raised by P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* III (Paris 1974) 862.
22 Palmer, "A Mycenaean 'Akhillid'?" (previous note) 258.
23 Nagy, "The Name of Achilles" (above, note 3) 216. This article includes a thematic analysis of μήνις in the Homeric *Iliad*, where I argued that "the theme of Achilles’s anger is singled out by the composition as the most central and hence most pervasive in the Iliadic tradition" (211) and that the Homeric deployment of μήνις indicates "a distinctive Iliadic association of this word with all the epic events that resulted from Achilles’ anger against Agamemnon, my most arguments of which is the devastation [ἄλγεα] suffered by the Achaeans" (211–12). When I rewrote my arguments about Homeric μήνις in *Best of the Achaeans* (above, note 3) 72–74, I added the important etymological and thematic observations of C. Watkins, "A propos de ΜΗΝΙΣ, " *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* 72 (1977) 187–209
the ἄχος experienced by warriors in the epic *Dichtersprache* is formulaically the converse of κράτος; that is, the λαός, or "host of fighting men," is conventionally described as having κράτος when they win, ἄχος when they lose.  

It is crucial to note in this context Benveniste's demonstration that the semantics of κράτος are driven by a "zero-sum" mentality: The very fact that one of two sides gets κράτος necessitates that this side is thereby the winner and the other side the loser. Moreover, the thematic polarity of κράτος / ἄχος is mirrored by the morphological parallelism of 'Αχαῖάς / κραταίος, embedded in the formulaic system of the Homeric *Dichtersprache*, and the very name of the λαός, that is, the 'Αχαῖοι, is synchronically derived from ἄχος—at least, within the framework of this *Dichtersprache*.

How, then, could it happen that the naming of this host of fighting men was driven by a negative concept, as encoded in the word ἄχος? My answer centered on both the ritual and the mythological aspects of warfare, as viewed within the epic tradition. Palmer asks a similar question about the naming of a hero like Achilles: It can only happen, he answers, if the very idea of *Akhil-lągos, “whose λαός has ἄχος,” had been generated by the themes of myth.

And yet the name of Achilles is "attractively identified," as Palmer puts it, in the Linear B tablets: In the text of Pylos tablet Fn 70. 2, a list of names in the dative includes a-ki-re-we, to be read as Akhil(l)ęwei. As I commented on this attestation, "we must be ready to assume that the mythopoeic name of 'Αχιλ(λ)έως inspired the naming of historical figures called 'Αχιλ(λ)έος." Palmer comments on my comment: "In fact, it is at the very least unlikely that any parent would have bestowed such a name on his son unless its inauspicious overtones had been masked by its occurrence as a heroic name in a famous story." If Palmer's "chain of reasoning," as he calls it, is correct, "then the Pylian record may be construed as implying

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(which article does not mention the relevant thematic observations in Nagy, "The Name of Achilles" [above, note 3] 211–12, 215–17).


28 Palmer, "A Mycenaean 'Akhilleid'?" (above, note 21) 258.

29 Palmer, "A Mycenaean 'Akhilleid'?" (above, note 21) 258.

30 Nagy, "The Name of Achilles" (above, note 3) 210.

31 Palmer, "A Mycenaean 'Akhilleid'?" (above, note 21) 258.
that a version of the 'Wrath of Akhilleus' was current at the time of the destruction of Pylos.”

All this is not to rule out an etymological connection, proposed by Holland, between the intermediate reconstructed Greek form *Ἀχιλλος and “proto-Germanic” *Agilaz, from which the Old Norse name Egill can be derived. Still, even though Holland allows for the possibility of an earlier reconstructed Greek form *Akhí-láuros, the acceptance of a Germanic cognate *Agilaz leaves us with morphological as well as semantic problems that are unresolved. In another connection, Palmer once called attention to “the first rule of etymology,” attributed to Franz Skutsch: “Look for Latin etymologies first on the Tiber.” That “rule” is applicable to the name of Achilles.

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32 Palmer, “A Mycenaean ‘Akhilleid’?” (above, note 21) 258–59. Moreover, there is an attestation of a-ki-re-u, to be read as Akhilleus, in Knossos-tablet Vc 106.

33 Holland (above, note 8) 25.

34 I am not persuaded by Holland’s argument (above, note 8) 26, that ἔχος at Il. 13. 86 and 417 is to be interpreted as “fear,” not “grief.”