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The etymology of English shower

1. Gothic skura ‘storm’ and Old Norse skár ‘shower’ continue a feminine Proto-Germanic noun *skuro*. In Gothic, skura appears twice in nearly the same context in the passages Mark 4:37 jaht warp skura windis mildla ‘and a big storm rose’ and Luke 8:23 jaht atiddja skura windis in pana marisaiw ‘and there arrived a storm at the lake’. In both cases, skura windis translates Greek λαύσανας ἀνέμου ‘a storm of wind’. Most of the West-Germanic languages point to a masculine cognate *skure-, e.g. Old English scēr, Middle Dutch regenschuyr ‘rain-shower’ and Old High German scēr. However, the noun is also attested as a feminine, viz. in Middle High German schure (cf. Lexer 1876: 828, Grimm 1893: 3231) and Middle Dutch scure ‘shower’, donrescuere ‘thunderstorm’. Furthermore, feminine gender is attested in modern continental dialects, e.g. in Hessa (Berthold 1967: 106) and in most dialects in the Riparian Rhineland and in the Dutch and Belgian provinces of Limburg. The feminine gender in Limburg and the adjacent Rhineland is shown by Dutch dialect enquiries (which are referred to in the caption to the map), and by various local dialect dictionaries, e.g. from the towns of Krefeld (Hermes 1978: 154), Maastricht (Endepols 1955: 383), Venlo (Alsters c.s. 1993: 236), and Weert (Hermans c.s. 1998: 315). Another clue to the reconstruction of f. *skuro* is the fact that this word has tone accent 1 in most Limburg dialects, which points to original disyllabicity of the word.

The most frequent meaning of the West-Germanic words is ‘shower’, usually of rain or hail; in north-eastern Dutch, the word especially means ‘thunderstorm’ (Weijnen 1951: 13). The meaning ‘heavy shower’ of Old Norse skár and Old English scēr is sometimes used metaphorically as ‘a shower of missiles’, or with a more general meaning ‘trouble, disquiet’; a similar use is attested for Middle Dutch scure. In Frisian, skor or skuar has specialized to the meaning ‘gust of wind, squall’, but on the island of Ameland the meaning ‘shower of rain’ has been preserved in un skoe(ie)r ‘a heavy rain-shower’ (Oud 1987: 216).
2. Within Germanic, *skurð has remained without certain etymological connections. Most scholars connect *skurð with words for 'north' or 'north wind' in other branches of Indo-European: Latin caurus 'showery north-west wind'; Lith. šiauré 'north' and Slavic words for 'north' such as Old Church Slavonic severa, SCR. šejer, Slovene sever, etc.; Armenian cöwert 'cold'; cf. Pokorny 1959: 597, De Vries 1977: 507, Beekes in Mallory-Adams 1997: 644, Kluge-Seebold 1999: 714. However, not all scholars are completely convinced of this connection, as appears from the hesitant formulation of Kluge-Seebold: "Im Falle der Zusammengehörigkeit wäre (*sk)èwera-anzusetzen." Indeed, there are reasons to doubt that Germanic *skurð is cognate either with the Balto-Slavic words and Latin caurus, or with Armenian cöwert.

3. The connection between Lith. šiauré and OCS severá on the one hand and Latin caurus on the other seems the least problematic one. The different ablaut of the Lith. (*keh,ur-) and the Slavic (*keh,er-) forms may point to an original noun *keh,er-øy- 'north'. Latin caurus can be connected with the Balto-Slavic words by reconstructing *khug,er-øy-a, according to Schrijver 1991: 252.

It does not seem obvious to me that Gm. *skurð 'shower' must be cognate with the root *khug,er- 'north (wind)' of the previous words. One may think in very broad terms of 'showers' being 'bad weather' and of cold, northern winds which also bring 'bad weather', but a common denominator of two meanings is only a paper reconstruction: it is preferable to derive one word from 'shower' or 'shower' from 'north'. The latter possibility might be assumed if most showers were brought by northern winds, but in the absence of s-mobile in Balto-Slavic and Latin, and in view of unclear -t, this scenario is hardly more than a wild guess.2

4. We may conclude that a connection of Germanic *skurð with any of the forms outside Germanic is questionable. In its stead, I would like to propose an alternative, inner-Germanic etymology which better explains form and meaning. The noun *skurð can be derived from the Germanic root *skur- 'to break, tear', which is attested in various nominal derivatives: Gothic winpiskauro 'winnowing fork' < *-skuHr-, Olic. skora n. 'notch, cleft', OHG scorro 'rock, cliff, crag'; Olic. bergsker f. 'chasm', English shore, MiDutch score 'shore, promontory'; *skurð, MoDutch scheur 'tear' < *skurí. The root *skur- is undoubtedly the zero grade of *sker- 'to cut, tear', the root of Oic. skera and OHG skeran; the derivation of words for 'rock' or 'shore' from 'to cut, tear' is well attested.

The formation of *skurð on the basis of a root *skur- belongs to a productive ablaut pattern in Germanic. Secondary -t on the basis of roots in *u is well-known in the verb systems of the Germanic dialects, where *u represents the root vowel of several second class strong verbs, e.g. Goth. ga-tukan 'to close'. In the other Old Germanic languages, we find more examples of this type, e.g. Old English brittan 'to use', bitgan 'to bend', scitan 'to shave', stridan 'to rub', súcan 'to suck', etc. This formation type probably follows the model of the first class of Germanic strong verbs. The

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2 Formerly, many scholars have proposed a connection of cöwert with Pfr. *skarta- 'cold' (Av. sarata, MoP sand 'cold'), cf. the collection of etymologies in Averbaj 1926-35 IV:463f. However, the expected outcome of a PIE preform *skerdo would rather be Arm. tçord.

2 Seebold 1970: 48 provides a list of 27 second class strong verbs which have -t- instead of -e-in in the present. The list shows that this type is best attested in Old English, Old Frisian and Old Saxon (+ Middle Low German and Dutch), somewhat less in Old High German and Old Norse, and hardly at all in Gothic.
PGm. monophthongization of *e/-o/ made that the first class had *e/- in the present, *-ar- in the past sg. and *-i in the past pl., which caused some of the second class verbs with an original ablaut *eu-: *-au-: *-u- to replace *eu- by *-i- in order to maintain the parallelism with the first class (thus e.g. Campbell 1999: 303).

Less attention has been devoted to secondary *-i- in nominal forms, but the etymological dictionaries betray numerous instances of this phenomenon in Germanic. A well-known example is the word 'loud': OHG hlltt, OS, OFri., OE hlld, which must go back to PIE *klE-tos - as attested in Skt. sruti- 'heard, famous', Gr. klyttos 'famous', etc. A short list of examples is given by Lühr 1988: 319, e.g. *stitha- 'stump' next to *stubba-, *ptitta- 'throat' next to *struttos-, etc. As Lühr argues (p. 257, 319f.), long -i- will have spread analogically from a smaller nucleus of forms with inherited *-i-. We may conclude that the derivation within Germanic of nouns in *skur- from a root *skeu- corresponds to a well-known pattern.

The semantic link between the verb *skur- and the noun *sktura- 'shower' lies in PGm. *sktura 'shelter, shed', as attested in Ml: skturt, Norse, Danish skur 'lean-to; wooden hut', OHG scurr n. 'lean-to, shelter, shed', MoHG Schauer m./n. 'Overdach, Wetterdach, Schuppe, Scheune' (Grimm 1893: 2328). A feminine *skturo of the same meaning is reflected in Olic. skår 'almond shell'; Norse dial. skår 'upper layer of a haystack', OHG scura 'granary, shed'. The word for 'shed' has been replaced by *skturo in many dialects of West-Germanic, yielding OHG scūtra, MHG schüre, MoHG Scheuer, MiD schure, MoD schuèr 'granary, shed'.

Thus, there were two nouns *skur- and *sktura in PGm., both of which had the meaning of 'lean-to, shelter, cover'; this meaning may easily be derived from the root *skar- 'to split off'.

5 It seems to me that PGm. *sktura 'shower' is the same word as *sktura 'shelter': the basic notion of a 'shelter' is its 'cover', and one of the characteristics of a shower is that the sky becomes 'covered', overcast. The existence of a PGm. homonym *sktura meaning both 'shelter' and 'shower' seems unproblematic: in modern German, Schauer still has both meanings: Regenschauer, but also Schauerschirm.

6. The proposed semantic development from 'shelter' to 'shower' has a parallel at a later stage of continental WGm. In a continuous area on the border of Low Franconian and Ripuarian, stretching from near Maastricht to Düren in the south and from Roermond to near Mönchen-Gladbach in the north, PGm. *sktura 'shower' has been replaced by reflexes of *sktulo. The area in which this replacement has happened is outlined on the map. The actual form is mostly [ʃu]/l (f.) with tone accent 1, which indicates original disyllabicity. Originally, *sktulo had the meaning 'lean-to, shelter', as it had in OFri. skulo l. 'shelter', and still has in eastern Dutch and Low German sktulo l., MoD schuul 'shelter'. Another derived meaning is shown by the Early MoHG word Schuhle(e), Schoule 'castle-tower', attested in Palatian charters from 1594, 1613 and 1617 (Postc.s. 1987-93: 898). The stem *sktulo- dates back to PGm., as shown by Olic. skylí 'hiding place' and skalí 'protector'.

The meaning 'shower' is not attested for *sktulo anywhere in continental WGm. outside the area indicated on the map, and this is a clear indication that 'shower' has secondarily developed from 'shelter'. Most of the dialects with [ʃu|l] 'shower' preserve the verb [ʃu|l] with the meaning 'to take shelter'.

Due to the latter origin and the less wide spread of the semantic shift, *sktulo presents a very clear case of the metaphorical use of 'shelter' for an 'overcast' sky; this case also shows that no intermediate steps in the semantic shift need to be assumed. The original meaning of *sktulo- 'cover' is also shown by another derivative, viz. *sktulo- 'mouth-disease, blisters or ulcers covering the mouth', which is variously found to apply with horses (MHG schült, Dutch dialects), sheep (Swiss dialects) or children (schul|school 'swollen gums' in many Dutch dialects); thus already van Haeringen 1936: 150.

The root *skulu- will be the secondary full grade to the root *skul- 'to split off', which yields e.g. German Scholle, Dutch schoel 'clod of earth, lump' < *skulltron. In its turn, *skul- may without hesitation be derived from PGm. *skel- 'to split, separate'. Thus, the semantic chain of derivation from 'to split off' → 'cover, shelter' → 'shower', which we assumed for *sker- → *skur- → *skur-, also explains *skulo 'shower':

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4 I have discussed another such form, viz. *trpo- 'caterpillar' (German Raupe) from a non-laryngeal root *tnp-, and its Germanic relatives in De Vaan 2000: 171.

5 In theory, a reconstruction *sktinso is also possible; this would imply positing an extra ablaut grade *skeur-, which is not impossible. However, such a preform would Deviate in two ways (viz. by means of its root ablaut and its suffix) from the most basic form *skturo, so that *sktinso seems less likely than *skturo.
8. Old Saxon skieron 'cloud, pack of clouds', which is used in Genesis 17 haglas skion as a translation of Old English hagles scetr. Århammar 1964: 26 has shown conclusively that skion reflects a PGm. a-stem *skuena-. This implies that skion may be connected with MLG schuene, MoGerman Scheune 'shelter, shed'. The etymology of the latter word is regarded as unknown. In OHG, it is attested in glosses as scugina, scuginne, scugina, for which most scholars (from Grimm 1893: 2625 to Kluge-Seebold 1999: 719) consider the possibility that it contains a root *skug-. However, it seems unlikely that intervocalic -g- and geminate -ui- would have survived from the MLG and modern reflex, if they really were pronounced. It seems more probable that scugina and scuina are the OHG preforms of Scheune. We may assume that the spelling -ugi- is a variant of -ui- (cf. Muspilli vugir 'fire'), the grapheme which was used beside -ui- to write front rounded /y/- (Braune-Egers 1987: 52, 110). These observations imply a reconstruction of Scheune as *skuio-.  

To my mind, Scheune cannot be separated from MLG schuén, Dutch scheun 'slanting, oblique', which Franck-van Wijk 1912: 633 reconstruct as *skuio-na- or *skuina-. They compare Norse dial. scheun ‘to cut obliquely’ < *skuaiun, which shows us the common source for *skuio ‘slanting’ and *skuio- ‘shelter’, viz. a PGm. root *skuio- ‘to cut, split off’.  

In conclusion, we may reconstruct PGm. *skuiojan ‘to cut obliquely’, PGm. *skuiojan ‘oblique, slanting, shelter, shed’, and PGm. *skuio ‘cloud’. These words thus provide a third instance of the semantic chain of derivation ‘to split’ → ‘shelter’ → ‘cloud’. Although the suffix of OS skieron and German Scheune is different, it is unproblematic to assume either that *skuio- ‘shelter’ had beside it a noun *skuio- ‘shelter’ (cf. *skuio- and *skuio- ‘shed’), or that *skuio ‘cloud’ continues an earlier i-stem *skuio ‘cloud’ (cf. *skuio and *skuio ‘shower’).

7. Finally, we may consider the Old Saxon word skieron ‘cloud, pack of clouds’, which is used in Genesis 17 haglas skion as a translation of Old English hagles scetr. Århammar 1964: 26 has shown conclusively that skion reflects a PGm. a-stem *skuena-. This implies that skion may be connected with MLG schuene, MoGerman Scheune ‘shelter, shed’. The etymology of the latter word is regarded as unknown. In OHG, it is attested in glosses as scugina, scuginne, scugina, for which most scholars (from Grimm 1893: 2625 to Kluge-Seebold 1999: 719) consider the possibility that it contains a root *skug-. However, it seems unlikely that intervocalic -g- and geminate -ui- would have survived from the MLG and modern reflex, if they really were pronounced. It seems more probable that scugina and scuina are the OHG preforms of Scheune. We may assume that the spelling -ugi- is a variant of -ui- (cf. Muspilli vugir ‘fire’), the grapheme which was used beside -ui- to write front rounded /y/- (Braune-Egers 1987: 52, 110). These observations imply a reconstruction of Scheune as *skuio-.  

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8. Old Saxon scuron and OHG scuron

In this final section, we turn to the alleged attestation of scuron ‘shower’ in the Old Saxon Heliand, viz. in the passage Heliand 5135-36: that man ina uuitnodi wapnes eggeron, scarpon scuron 'daß man ihn mit der Schneide der Waffe, mit scharfen scuron bestreifen solle' (translation by Lühr 1982: 703).  

This passage may be compared with the closely parallel use of scuron in the OHG Hildenbrandslied, viz. line 59-60: do lehtun se zerist askim scritan, scarpon scuron, dat in dem sciltim stont. 'Da liessen sie zuerst [die Pferde] mit den Speeren, mit scharfen scuron, traben, so daß es an den Schilden zum Stehen kam' (translation by Lühr 1982: except for scuron).

Both scuron and scuron are used as appositions to a preceding noun in the dative, viz. eggeron 'blade' and askim 'spears'. It is commonly assumed that scuron is used metaphorically as a 'shower of arrows' or 'weapons', especially since Müllenhoff-Scherer 1873: 263 have pleaded in favour of this etymology. They argue that scuron and scuron may be compared with the Old Norse dial. scuron, Old Germanic languages, where we find e.g. OE flata scuras 'showers of arrows' and Old Germanic languages, where we find e.g. Old Norse scuras 'showers of shields'. The notion of 'sharpness' would have the noun scuron itself. However, the use of scuron and scuron is not exactly parallel, because they do not indicate a collection of 'spears' or 'arrows', as in the Old Germanic languages, but rather occur as (near) synonyms of 'shower' in the Old Germanic languages, except – if Müllenhoff-Scherer's explanation were accepted – in the two passages we are discussing here.

Therefore, we may return to the explanation of scuron and scuron which was already given earlier in the 19th century, viz. that they may be translated as 'with cuts, tears'. More precisely, OS scuron may represent the dat.pl. of *skur- (with short *u*), which occurs e.g. in Gothic winþiskaum, whereas OHG scuron will be the dat.pl. of the stem *skuri- ‘tear, cut’ which yields Dutch scheur. It was probably the unfamiliarity with this stem *skuri- which led earlier German scholars to reject this possibility; in any case, Müllenhoff-Scherer p. 263 talk about 'ein unerweisliches scur'schnitt'. Lühr 1982: 703 argues that OHG scuron may have to be emended to scuron, so that both the Heliand and the Hildebrandslied would have used the same stem *skuro-. This is possible, in view of the two surrounding forms askim and scuron; but since both *skuro- and *skur- varied side by side in PG(M)Gm., it is perfectly legitimate to accept both OS scuron and OHG scuron without emendation.

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The translation of Helland 5135-6 will then be *that man ina mitodi wapnes eegugin, skarpun skurun* that they should punish him with weapon-blades, with sharp cuts. For the translation of Hildebrandslied 59-60, I see two possibilities: *do lettun se eerist asckim scritan, scarpen scurirn, dat in dem sciltim stont* 'Then they first let the [horses] trot with the spears, among sharp cuts, so that it halted against the shields' or 'Then they first let the (ash-)spears fly, with sharp cuts, until it halted in the shields'.

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Map:
In the area within the dotted line, the reflex of Gm. *sku{o} means 'shower'. For Dutch and Belgian Limburg, the map is based on the words for 'thunderstorm' and 'rainshower' in two dialect enquiries: University of Nijmegen, questionary 22 (1963), question 15a 'rainshower'; Dialectencommissie (Meertens Institute, Amsterdam) questionary 56B, II (1981), questions 4 and 15 'the shower accompanying a thunderstorm'; question 1 'thunderstorm' and questions 2 and 3 'dark clouds promising bad weather'. The German part of the area is after map 20 in Müller c.s. 1948-58: 955, for which the data were gathered in the year 1931.