An Etymology of Afrikaans *ghoen*
('a shooting-marble')

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Abstract: The Afrikaans word *ghoen* ('a shooting-marble') arose in a setting wherein Malay, Khoekhoe, and Dutch were spoken and in which children played and shared vocabulary. Given the similarity of meaning and sound shape among Malay *gundu* ('a marble'), Khoekhoe *!gon* ('to throw something on the ground'), and dialectal Dutch *koen* ('a shooting-marble'), I propose that these semantically and phonetically similar etyma merged into the word *ghoen* through a process, here referred to as lexical syncretism, which has been remarked on by other scholars of language history and contact.

Keywords: etymology; Afrikaans; syncretism; games; lexicon

1. Lexical syncretism

In examining a language such as Afrikaans, which has multiple inputs (Dutch, German, Malay, Khoekhoe, English) and numerous confounding phenomena (e.g. the definite article, *die*, the *-hulle* construction, the possessive particle *se*) one sees striking cases in which there is more than one probable source for a given item. An apposite example of this is the once very common word *ghoen* ('a shooting-marble'),

which can be traced back to Malay *gundu* ('a marble'), Khoekhoe *!gon* ('to throw something on the ground'), and dialectal Dutch *koen* ('a shooting-marble'). Frederic Cassidy (1966) outlined precisely this type of phenomenon in an article on so-called *multiple etymologies* in Jamaican Creole. The term would later be employed by Mühlhäusler (1982: 101-108) and Bechert and Wildgen (1991: 13), however, it seems to be a misnomer, because it is not the etymologies that are multiple, but rather the source words that are – an etymology tells the story of those potentially multiply sourced words but is not itself multiple. Wexler (1983: 257 note 75) and Rickford (1986: 269) provide further examples of this phenomenon, as does Zuckermann (2004: 283), who introduces the terms *multisourced neologization* and *camouflaged borrowing* to describe the subconscious act of simultaneous importation and substitution. Haugen (1969) hits on it as well with the categories of homologous extension (Haugen 1969: 403) and interlingual coincidence (Haugen 1969: 386-387), both of which require a high degree of phonetic and semantic agreement. Given the terminological bedlam here, we might as well add another and call this lexical syncretism, cf. *multilevel syncretism* in Roberge (1996).

The issue, as in folk etymology, revolves around the cognitive process of associating the unfamiliar with the familiar. Boshoff (1921: 341) identifies this as apperception in the sense that Herbart (1825: 215) conceived of it; i.e. newly-encountered words/ideas are associated with similar, familiar words/ideas. A semantic variety of apperceiving the world is seen in Afrikaans animal names, where *tier* ('tiger') means leopard, *wolf* ('wolf') means hyena, or the desert succulent *moraea edulus* is called *uintjie* ('onion'). Especially importantly in the case of *ghoen*, this process also plays a large role in listener bias, when only those sounds closest to those of the borrowing language are picked up, and sometimes it is these approximated sounds that can prove most interesting in illuminating fundamental aspects of language contact.

2. A bird's-eye view of *ghoen*

The game of marbles is old in South Africa; that it was already being played in the 17th and 18th centuries has been shown by Hudson (1956: 21), which is not surprising, since the game is old in the Low Countries (Drost 1914: 93-110). Of the many words related to the game, *ghoen* has proven especially troublesome. It is not attested in any archival documents – at least none that I have been able to find [1] – and

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[1] The lexicographer Johan du Plessis was kind enough to comb the archives of the *Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal* for attestations of *ghoen*. The earliest is from 1930: "Sy rug was ook skaars straat-toe gedraai of die albasterspeel is alweer in volle gang: 'glassies' en 'ellies' spat onder die goedgekorrelde 'ghoens,' wat deur jong, maar sterk geoefende middelvingers geskiet word." (She had barely turned her back before the marbles game was back in full swing. Well-aimed 'ghoens' shot by young, well-

word-initial *gh-* in a Germanic word is, but for a handful of cases, not regular in Afrikaans.

The first citation of *ghoen* is by Pannevis in 1880 (Van der Merwe 1971: 95); he gives *koenie*. Forms with both the diminutive *-ie* and the hypocoristic *-a* are recorded, and the variants *ghan* and *ghôn* also exist. The only instance of *k-* is in Pannevis. Mansvelt (Van der Merwe 1971: 160), whose work appeared in 1884, provided two forms of the word, *ghoen* or *ghôn* ('a throwing-rock; a large marble') and *ghoeni* ('a regular marble'). Boshoff (1921: 259) took issue with Mansvelt's lemmatization of these words, claiming that *ghoeni* was unknown to him, though he says nothing about the form with [ɔ] instead of [u]. Whatever problems his work might have had, Mansvelt was the first to offer an etymology of the word, deriving it from Khoekhoe *ghoen* ('to go'). Presumably he means either *!kū* or *!gūn* ('to go, walk'); see Krönlein (1889) and Rust (1969). Hesseling (1899: 80) agreed with this idea, however unlikely it might be.

For Pettman (1913), who consulted Krönlein (1889), *!gon* 'to throw sth. on the ground; twitch, jerk' is the word's source. As most of the words related to marbles in South Africa are derived from verbs meaning 'twitch, jerk, throw,' not 'go' (cf. *tjoek* < *tukken, tjukken* 'twitch, jerk,' *dok* < *dokken* 'twitch, jerk' [Boshoff and Nienaber 1967]), this derivation is more reasonable. The click *!g* is regularly borrowed into Afrikaans as [g], and the word's meaning is also good. In discussing this derivation, Smith (1921: 457 note 2) [2] excited many students of Afrikaans when he drew a connection between *ghoen* and the North Hollandic dialect word *koen* 'a shooting-marble' (Boekenoogen 1897). [3] But he must not have convinced himself, for he later mentions in passing that *ghoenie* is a word of Khoekhoe or Malay origin (Smith 1962: 58). In the second edition of his work on Afrikaans, Hesseling (1923: 77 note 1) lists *ghoen* under the rubric of Khoekhoe loan-words, with the caveat that it is "zeer goed mogelik" ('very possible indeed') that *ghoen* is an altered form of *koen*. [4]

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trained fingers knocked the 'glassies' and 'ellies' about.) *Die Nuwe Brandwag* 2(1).

[2] In a footnote to the March 1921 installment of G.R. von Wielligh's series of articles called "Ons geselstaal" (1921), Smith writes the following about a list of words given by Von Wielligh as Khoekhoe: "Verskeie van die hier genoemde woorde se afleiding is onseker (b.v. *ghoen*, wat volgens sommige dieselfde as die Noord-Hollandse dialektiese woord *koen* is, ...)" (The derivations for many of the words mentioned here are not settled (e.g. *ghoen*, which, according to some, is the same as the North Hollandic dialect word *koen* ...)). In that parenthetical statement, *some* refers to J.L.M. Franken, who mentioned the connection to Smith (Franken 1953a: 150-151), which was apparently the second time that Smith had published an etymology based on a comment by Franken without giving him credit for having come up with it in the first place (Franken 1953a: 144).

[3] Boekenoogen (1897) writes: "Bij het knikkerspel dat g o r r e n heet. *De gebakken knikker, van middelbare grootte, waarmede de speler naar den gor schiet*. De k o e n is een gewone knikker, die alleen in deze bepaalde functie zoo geheeten wordt." (In the version of marbles called *gorren. The clay marble, of middling size, which the player uses for shooting at the 'gor.'* The *koen* is a regular marble that is only indicated as such when being used in this function.).

[4] Comparable is Franken (1953b: 16-17), who hazards a grope in the dialectal darkness when he de-

It was, however, Boshoff (1921: 259-260) who first saw the possibility that *!gon* and *koen* could have blended and influenced one another to result in *ghoen*. The idea was revised in Boshoff and Nienaber (1967), where the separate definitions 'shooting-marble' and 'throwing-rock' are given. Boshoff thought that *koen* was certainly related to the first meaning, to which Malay *gundu* ('a marble') could also have contributed, as could have *≠koa-//gūn* ('ivory'), out of which ghoens used to be made. The second meaning he connects with *!gon*. He concludes by mentioning that the two could have run together. The semantic distinction Boshoff makes seems far less important when one bears in mind that playtime words for rocks and marbles have been interchangeable in Afrikaans since at least the early 19th century; see the use of *knikkertjie* ('marble') for a rock (Spoelstra 1922: 54; Van Rooijen 1940: 116) and *ghoen* for a rock (Du Toit 1953: 2).

Van Wyk et al. (2003) reiterate Boshoff and Nienaber (1967), and then follow the WAT in mentioning a possible connection with *ghoem* ('a whopper, big one'). A connection with *ghoem*, while phonetically satisfactory, is probably unlikely, since a *ghoen* can be either large or mid-size; its main feature is that it is used for shooting.

3. A Khoekhoe etymon: *!gon*

In looking at the terms used by children, what little evidence there is suggests that when Afrikaans-speaking children were in the minority and the contact with Khoikhoi children was heavy enough, Khoekhoe words were borrowed; see Du Toit (1953: 3) and Nienaber (1995: 50-51). Instances of the borrowing of English words during playtime are also known (Coetsee 1948: 14-15; Schepers 1954: 5-6). In the WAT there is a handful of words in Afrikaans, mostly of Khoekhoe origin, that relate to marbles. All of them are dialectal forms attested in the Boland (the southwestern area of the Cape of Good Hope), the area longest settled by Europeans and formerly inhabited by Khoikhoi. [5] Here the etymologist's task is complicated by the fact that the Khoikhoi languages of the Cape are

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rives the synonym of *ghoen*, *tjoek* ('a shooting-marble') from *tokken*, *tukken*, glossed by Kiliaen as ('to hit, strike'). He does not explain the problematic change of *t* > *tj*, or even suggest that it was loaned from Gronings *tjoekn* ('to twitch, start') or East Frisian *tjukken* ('to twitch, start') (Ten Doornkaat-Koolman 1884: 417), two of the dialects he was most interested in with respect to the lexicon of Afrikaans.
[5] *Ghaai* ('to shoot with the ghoen'; 'to win one's opponent's opening shot'; 'to steal'; 'to be last in the game'); *ghaai-ghaai* ('a variety of the game of marbles'); *ghal* ('a kind of ghoen'); *gharriets* ('a little pile of sand in the middle of the playing-circle upon which the marble is placed'); *ghim* ('exclamation to claim the last shot of the following game'); *ghoelie* ('long-finger shot'); *ghoems* ('to be last in the game'); *ghoeroe* ('circle in which the marbles are shot'); *ghoes* ('a variety of the game marbles'); *gholm* ('the group of marbles'); and *ghyl* ('shiny glass marble').

all now extinct and only partially documented, save for Nienaber (1963), which is first-rate scholarship but says nothing about *ghoen* or *!gon*. The closest we can come is to look at the Nama language of Namibia, which Krönlein (1889) investigated and is by no means perfectly representative.

The most cursory glance at these marbles-related words shows that Afrikaans has certain words for which *gh-* is an approximation of the tenuis alveolar click <!g> immediately followed by a vowel, which the Afrikaans speaker identifies as something like [g]. The significant number of other Khoi loanwords in Afrikaans with word-initial <!g> that are orthographically represented by <gh> shows this well.

Admittedly, the sheer preponderance of words with *gh-* would argue for a Khoekhoe source for *ghoen*, an idea which gains in persuasiveness when one sees the remark "pronounced with initial click" by most of the abovementioned *gh*-words in the WAT. Even though it begins with a click, ǂ*koa//gŭn* ('ivory') is probably not the source of *ghoen*, for the click here is tenuis palatal, not alveolar. More convincingly, however, while Dutch has many marble names that indicate the material out of which they are made (De Cock and Teirlinck 1905: 7-14), Afrikaans does not.

This leaves us with *!gon*, which could reasonably become *ghoen*; that *!gon* is a verb and not a noun might not be such a big deal if one imagines children gesturing towards a game in play and saying variously *!gon* or *gundu* or *koen* and perceiving each word as his own; i.e. the European child hears *!gon* as *koen/ghoen*, the Malay child hears *!gon* as *gun(du)*, etc. With respect to *!gon* > *ghoen*, the change [o] > [u] remains unreconciled, and we still need to account for the role of the speech of slaves, who largely spoke Malay and whose descendents are known as Cape Coloureds.

4. A Malay etymon: *gundu*

The only proponent of Malay *gundu* as the sole source word is Silva et al. (1996). Given the heavy contact between Coloured and European children throughout the history of South Africa, and the even footing on which children operate, as Poole (1951: GEVOLGTREKKINGS/2) points out, this would seem not to be a stretch.

The social and cultural relations between the two Afrikaans-speaking communities on the Cape, Europeans and Coloureds, are old, complex, and intimate (see Du Plessis 1935, 1945 and Du Plessis and Lückhoff 1953), and have resulted in no shortage of playtime nomenclature from the languages spoken or at least known by the earliest slaves on the Cape (Portuguese, Malay, Javanese). One famous loan pair is *kierang* and *koerang/tjoerang* ('to cheat at games; too little, few')

from Javanese *kirang* and Malay *tjoerang*, respectively (Odendal 1966). These two have merged semantically into the modern-day doublet *kierang/(tj-)koerang*. Pienaar (1931) gives an equally reasonable explanation of *kannie-koenie/koenie-kannie/ghoenie-ghannie*, which he glosses ('to make jealous') as a word from Malayo-Portuguese. [6] Another Portuguese derivation that Scholtz (SV) and Poole (1951: IV/9) agree on is *pakka* ('to pay in the game of marbles') < *pagar* ('to pay'). [7]

   Of course, the idea is not to overly adduce examples, but rather to illustrate that the languages of slaves on the Cape (Malay, Creole Portuguese, and Portuguese) are all represented in the speech of children at play, a fact which would seem to lend support to the idea that *gundu* 'a marble' could have been loaned in as *ghoen* or at least helped to alter and perpetuate *koen*. I know of no examples of Malay word-final *-du* being lost in Afrikaans, but the change would have to look something like this, were it to have followed regular soundlaws in Afrikaans: *gundu* > *gundə* > *gund* > *gun*. This is rather fanciful and moreover unattested, but not impossible.

5. A Dutch etymon: *koen*

The only problem with tracing *ghoen* to North-Hollandic *koen* is the presence of the voiced velar stop word-initially, for no regular change of Dutch *k-* > *gh-* is known in Afrikaans. Posthumus (1972: 152) calls word-initial [g] a marginal phoneme because it occurs only in loan words, yet still forms minimal pairs: from English *gholf – kolf – wolf – golf*, from Khoekhoe *ghaap – kaap – raap – gaap*. This is as deep as the discussion goes; all other phonological analyses of Afrikaans give it short shrift on account of its being a loan phoneme (Le Roux 1910: 118; De Villiers 1953: 284; Odendal 1955: 15; De Villiers and Ponelis 1987: 110).

   If *ghoen* is indeed from Dutch dialectal *koen*, then it is a rare case of [k] > [g]. The only other instances of this change that I know of are *beghaits* < *bekaaits* ('drunk') (Bergerson 2004: 93), *ghantang* < *kant hang* ('suitor') (Du Toit 1958); *ghwar* ('ragamuffin, hellion') could well be related to Dutch *kwar* ('plant or animal that fails to blossom, mature'), and a connection is possible between *gholm* ('a group of marbles') and East Frisian *kwalm* ('a disordered group or bunch') (Ten Doornkaat-Koolmann 1882: II, 432-3). Le Roux (1968: 337) regards it as self-evident that *koen* and *ghoen* should be the same word, though *gh-* leaves him nonplussed; see also Terblanche and Odendaal (1966).

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[6] This after offering a tentative and spurious derivation from Zulu *gana-snoep*, Pienaar (1930).
[7] Compare further, Malay *tjuma* > *tjoema* 'for nought in marbles' (Poole 1951: V/7; AE), *tinha/tinka* 'a marble' < Mal. *tenga* (Boshoff and Nienaber 1967).

The irregularity of word-initial *gh-* might be partially explained by the word-initial realization of velar stops in loanwords: [g] is often realized as [k], [8] and English [kʰ] as [g], [9] which seems to suggest that aspiration is perceived as some manner of voicing; interestingly enough, the sucking sound in the tenuis alveolar click before a vowel seems also to have been foreign enough to be realized as *gh-*. Pannevis likely hit upon this in discussing what he calls "soft *k*"; see *s.v. kaab* (*ghaap*?, or possibly *Caab,* where we would have another case of *k*-lenition), *kaard* (Eng. *guard*), *kini* (Eng. *guinea*), *koeanno* (*ghwano*), *koenie* (*ghoenie*) (Van der Merwe 1971: 95). It is, as Le Roux and Pienaar (1927: 73) point out, an only very slightly voiced [g], which is easily perceived as [k] or [g], depending on the native tongue of the listener.

One of the most compelling aspects of the *koen* derivation is semantic. Most names for marbles refer to what brings the marble into motion, but North Hollandic *koen* runs a different course. Since we have no reason to believe that it is not the same word as *koen* ('bold, brave'), it is the character of the marble that carries descriptive weight. Consider the shift 'skillful' > 'experienced (with weapons)' > 'brave,' which partially explains the relationship between courage and a game of skill, but the secondary meaning of speed is what is important here; see German *schnell* ('fast') < 'brave, powerful' (Kluge and Mitzka 1963), or English *keen* ('quick-witted') < 'brave, wise' (Onions 1966). So the marble called *koen* would be an instrument of power, speed, and special skill, all of which make good sense for a shooting-marble. That there is any magical aspect to *koen* is doubted by De Vries and De Tollenaere (1997), but given the variety of incantations used by children playing marbles, the plausibility of such a by-meaning does not seem overreaching; see Schonken (1910: 8); Schepers (1954: 8).

6. Conclusion

Pace Ponelis (2002: 333), the number of possible etyma for *ghoen* is no hindrance for the etymologist; in fact, it is quite the contrary. So given the attractiveness of North-Hollandic, Khoekhoe, and Malay source for *ghoen*, it is fair to suppose that *koen*, *!gon*, and *gundu* could have all mutually influenced one another and resulted in *ghoen*.

It is entirely probable that Khoekhoe *!gon*, as evidenced by its vocalism, is the direct source of Boland dialectal by-forms *ghan*, *ghôn*. The number of Khoekhoe

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[8] E.g. *kerribollie* < *garibaldi* AE; *kaskenade* < *Gasconnade* Franken (1953a: 84), *kranadel* < *ghrenadilla* Von Wielligh (1922: 23 note 21); *koejawel* < *guava, kaskoiing* < *Gascogne*; *kitaar; guitar* (also *ghitaar*); *koewanna* < *ghwano* (SV); *kaparring* < *gamparran* Boshoff (1921: 343).
[9] E.g. *ghês* < Eng. *cash* WAT; *ghwarrie* < Eng. *quarry*; *gholla* ('cop') < Eng. *collie* (Coetsee 1948: 12), *ghronie* < Eng. *crown* (Coetsee 1948: 14).

words in the Boland dialect shows heavy borrowing in children's speech; what is more the vowels in the two words accord well. North Hollandic *koen* and Malay *gundu* are closest vocalically and semantically, and, given the historically close relations between European and Coloured children, it is reasonable to expect that they merged fairly quickly. Bearing in mind the number of Khoekhoe loan words used by Afrikaans-speaking children, one has to expect that there was support from *!gon*.

   True, as Godée-Molsbergen (1905: 216) points out, the number of North Hollanders on the Cape was very low, which would seem to make problematic the claim that Zaaans *koen* was used there. Others disagree about the low probability of North Hollandic influence; see Boekenoogen (1903) and Franken (1953b). Either way, sometimes words that had been more common are only retained in a few areas, so it is not unthinkable that *koen* existed in seventeenth-century Amsterdam koiné – itself the most prominent Dutch variety in the formation of Afrikaans (Scholtz 1963: 232-56) – and now only exists in Zaans. It could have been imported to South Africa and then coexisted with *ghan*, *ghôn* and would have been reinforced by them. They would have then become synonyms in the Boland, but everywhere else, *ghoen* would have been the only form. The familiar term for a large smoking-pipe, *ghoena*, could also have served to perpetuate the sense 'favorite thing,' inherent in a powerful, magical marble, the marble one always wants to shoot with. In this entirely possible scenario, the variant *ghoen* has become standard, and *ghan*, *ghôn* relegated to dialectal status.

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