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 comparaisic 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 SED\(^2\) (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 Iconym

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])\(^3\).

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\(^1\) 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]). 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: dishala(q) (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:kl (SED E 21Nf 2 [Great Snoring]: <coekle>) 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]: moswuf± ~ moswuf±) 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 Heraclium Sphondylium L., Polygonum aviculare L., Sonchus arvensis L., and Torilis anTHRiscus L. The motivation for this transfer is still to be resolved.

\[\text{4} \] The EDD (I: 188) notes that some dialects also have butter-dock “from its leaves being used for lapping butter”.

\[\text{5} \] The EDD (IV: 195) only gives ‘Artemisia vulgaris.’
3. Names with Assumedly [!] Clear Etymology and/or Iconomy

3.1. The type klīt <cleat> (SED, EDD I: 6876), OE clīte (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 thlæts (SED N 6Y 15 [Pateley Bridge]) and khaiks (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. gīdēt, 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, clīte (probably not with the long t that the IEW suggests, as only ē 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), including the subtypes coutfit (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. foledød and Swed. fälafött 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 colograet, which glosses Lat. caballopodia uel ungula caballi and which Kindschi, Bierbaumer and the TOE interpret as

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6 The EDD and the MED list several plants under cleat (and clète 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 coltesfoet and folesfoet 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, foilefote, coltisfote; this erbe is grene in that on eside and white in that ope.” The description would unfortunately also apply to Arctium lappa. As fas 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 past of England; the rest of England uses colt’s-foot.
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 *clite* ‘Tussilago farfara’ vs. OE *clâte* (aside from *foal-foot, horse-hoof*) and others ‘Arctium lappa’
2. onomasiological fuzziness: plants have similar features plus similar names
3. mixture not only of OE *clite* (ME *clête*) and OE *clâte* (ME *clôte*), but also of other synonyms for the two plants
4. The term *foal-foot* triggers off an onymically parallel construction *colt’s-foot*. (It may be asked whether *colt-*, which is 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 *bull-foot* (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 imagimable 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 maurus L.; Aquilegia vulgaris L.; Dactylis glomerata L.;’ s.v. *Craw-foot* ‘Ranunculus acris L.; Ranunculus repens L.’) clearly goes

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8 Bierbaumcr thinks that it is possible that the form is a corruption of *coltnaegl*, which then represented a loan translation (better: loan rendering) of *ungula caballina*. 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 gulein* (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 craw. 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 ptsbedz (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 clay, 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 then English English, then one can image the Scottish stem
dove ‘stupid, foolish’ as it occurs, e.g. in doven ed ‘benumbed with cold’ (cf. Warrack/Grant s.v.), in it—then the word doven ed may make us think of Tussilago farfara
as a plant agains cough. To proof this, however, we will have to wait for more profound
knowledge of historical Scots.

4. Names with Unclear Etymology and Iconomy

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

4.1. The form skooftfoot (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 kæzgæt
(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 kæostl (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 *kkeːps* (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 *dummies*, 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’s foot*, *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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EDD = Wright, Joseph (1898-1905), *The English Dialect Dictionary: Complete Vocabulary of All Dialect Words Still in Use, or Known to Have been in Use During the Last Two-Hundred Years*, 6 vol., Oxford: Oxford University Press.


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