

The Etymology of "Play"

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The English verb *play* is usually traced to Old English *plegan* / *plēon*, from Proto-West Germanic **plehan*, whose oldest reconstructible meaning is not simply “to amuse oneself,” but rather “to stand up for” and “to be responsible for.” The etymology of **plehan* remains unsettled. Wiktionary summarizes the inherited uncertainty and notes Kroonen’s comparison with Middle High German *spulgen*, from which a quasi-Indo-European pre-form **pslek-* has been proposed, though with no secure non-Germanic cognates.

This paper proposes an alternative: Proto-West Germanic **plehan* may belong to the same wider Indo-European or western European root-family as Latin *fulciō*, “to prop up, support, strengthen, secure.” Latin *fulciō* is itself uncertainly derived by Rix from **b^helk-*, through a form **b^hl̥k-yé-ti*; Wiktionary notes both the uncertainty and the limited external evidence, but the basic meaning of Latin *fulciō* is clearly “to prop up, support,” and secondarily “to strengthen, secure, support.”

The semantic match is unusually good. A verb meaning “to support, prop up, secure” may readily develop into “to stand up for, be responsible for,” especially in legal, social, or pledge-like contexts. Conversely, “to stand up for” is itself a metaphor of support. The old West Germanic meaning of **plehan* therefore lies much closer to Latin *fulciō* than the modern English meaning “play” would suggest.

The formal difficulty is the initial consonant. Latin *f-* points naturally to PIE **b^h-*, whereas Proto-Germanic or Proto-West-Germanic *p-* is not the normal direct reflex of PIE **b^h-*. However, this objection is less decisive than it first appears. The relevant comparison need not be stated as a regular sound law **b^h > *p*. Rather, the proposal is that Germanic may preserve a pre-Germanic **b-* variant of a wider **b^helk- / *belk-* root-family. Such a pre-Germanic **b-* would then yield Germanic **p-* by the ordinary Germanic treatment of earlier plain voiced **b*.

There is precedent for this type of move. Proto-Germanic *preunaz “pin, knitting needle” is derived, at least possibly, from earlier *bréuk-mō / *bréuk-(m)n-os, related to Lithuanian brukti “to prod” and Bulgarian brásna “to shave.” Following those cognates leads to PIE *b^hruk-. Thus a Germanic p- word may be connected, through a pre-Germanic b- variant, with a wider Indo-European b^h- root-family.

Other Proto-Germanic p- words point in the same methodological direction. Proto-Germanic *puttaz “pot, jar, tub” has been derived by an older theory from pre-Germanic *butnós / *budnós, “a kind of vessel, swelled-out shape,” from PIE *bewd- “to swell,” and has also been compared with Latin buttis “barrel.” In the related Proto-Slavic vessel word *bъдъña “tub, cask,” Trubachev’s explanation instead invokes PIE *b^hewd^h- “to bulge”; for the present argument, the important point is that *bewd- and *b^hewd^h- are treated as variants or closely overlapping forms in the same “swell, bulge” complex. Proto-Germanic *pakkô “bundle, pack” is compared with Celtic, Latin, and Greek bundle/load vocabulary, including Proto-Celtic *baskis, Latin fascis, and Greek phákelos. These are not clean inherited equations, but they show that Proto-Germanic p- appears precisely in the sort of irregular western IE or substrate-like vocabulary where other branches show b-, f-, ph- or related labial variation.

Additional examples strengthen the general pattern. Proto-Germanic *pus- “to blow, inflate; breathe hard” is perhaps from PIE *bew-, a variant of *b^hew- “to inflate, blow, swell,” while *pusô “bag, sack” belongs to the same inflation/bag complex. Proto-Germanic *paddô “toad” is possibly from PIE *bed- “to swell,” itself from *b^hew-. Even *pikkōnā “to pick, peck, prick” and *pīkaz “sharp point, pike” belong in this comparison class: *pikkōnā is compared with *bikjanā, from PIE *b^heg- “to smash, break,” and with Latin bucca, which Wiktionary says IEW compares with Proto-Germanic *puhō from PIE *bew, *b^hew- “to swell, puff”; *pīkaz is then treated as similar to, or secondary to, *pikkōnā. Finally, *pullaz and *pōlaz are useful as further evidence that Wiktionary allows Proto-Germanic p- beside pre-Germanic or external b- material ultimately connected, through cognate chains, with PIE *b^h- roots.

The proposed history, then, is not that PIE *b^helk- regularly and directly became Proto-Germanic *plehan. The proposal is instead that Latin *fulciō* and West Germanic *plehan preserve different reflexes or variants of a labial-root complex meaning “support, prop, uphold, secure.” Latin would continue the expected *b^h- > f- branch, while Germanic would continue a pre-Germanic *belk- / *blek- variant whose initial was expectedly realized as p- in Germanic. The development of meaning would run from “support, prop, uphold” to “stand up for, be responsible for,” and only later, within Germanic, toward “take risk, stake, engage in contest,” and ultimately “play.”

This proposal has two advantages over the isolated *pslek-reconstruction. First, it gives *plehan an external semantic anchor: Latin *fulciō* supplies almost exactly the missing meaning, “support.” Second, it uses an attested etymological strategy found elsewhere in Proto-Germanic p- words: a Germanic p- form may correspond to external b/b^h/f/ph material when the word belongs to an old, irregular, western IE or substrate-like layer. The comparison is therefore speculative, but it is not arbitrary. It places play in a broader family of support, responsibility, and standing-for, rather than deriving it from an otherwise isolated *psl- formation with no secure non-Germanic cognates.

References

Wiktionary entries for the mentioned words and roots, as well as their respective textbook sources linked therein.