



Is *Folklore* a Calque of German *Volkskunde*?

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The word *folklore*, earlier *folk-lore*, is commonly recognized as coined by William Thoms (1803–1885) in a letter published in 1846 [1946], where the word also appeared as the title. Indeed, Thoms was quite proud of this coinage. He once celebrated it in verse as one of his two crowning achievements alongside his founding of the journal *Notes & Queries* (Roper 2008: 81). Nevertheless, Thoms' word *folklore* is commonly considered a calque of German *Volkskunde* (sometimes called 'cognate', e.g. Ben Amos 2020: 9), a view that is often reiterated as an aetiological legend of the field. The question warrants a critical look, to consider the legend's accuracy to the past and whether an alternative view might be more suitable.

Statements that *folklore* was borrowed from German were already being made during Thoms' lifetime. He objected to these in publication, asserting "the English origin of the word Folk-lore" (Emrich 1946: 372). Thoms originally described his coinage as "a good Saxon compound, Folk-Lore, – *the Lore of the People*" (1846 [1946]: 361), a claim that underscores Thoms' ethno-nationalistic ideology (Roper 2008: 61–62). Indeed, he presented the new English word in a short piece that sang the praises of Jacob Grimm's 1844 edition of *Deutsche Mythologie* ['German Mythology'], calling for "some James Grimm" to rise up and do the same for the British (1846 [1946]: 361). However, considering Thoms' elevation of German scholarship, Duncan Emrich considered it likely that Thoms "would have pointed to the German *Volkskunde*, had he known of it, as an authoritative, scholarly example to bolster his first introduction of an English equivalent" (1946: 372). The question thus arises whether Thoms' ethno-nationalistic ideology drove him to actively erase his word's borrowing from German, or he saw *folklore* as clearly separate from the German word.

Thoms advanced the proposed field of Folklore as a reconception of what was called 'popular antiquities', championing Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* as a methodological model. Emrich points out that German scholars commonly employed *Volk-* in compounds when Thoms' coined *folklore*, but that *Volkskunde* remained relatively rare before W. H. Reichl's influential article "Die Volkskunde als Wissenschaft" (1858 [1862]) ('*Volkskunde* as a Science') (Emrich 1946: 371–372). Grimm's work is populated by *Volk-*compounds such as *Volksüberlieferung* ['popular tradition'], yet Grimm did not have a unified concept of 'folklore' *per se* (Frog 2022).

He mainly used *Volk-* with words that loosely refer to categories of traditions or genres, like *Volksglaube* ['popular belief'] (Grimm 1844). When considering Thoms' word *folklore*, it is noteworthy that Grimm did not use the word *Volkskunde*. Although the word *Volkskunde* was not as common in 1846 as it would later become, it was not invisible. It even appeared in book titles such as *Preußische Landes- und Volkskunde* (Preuß 1835) ['Prussian Geography and *Volkskunde*'], so Thoms may certainly have encountered it. Nevertheless, the idea that *folklore* is simply a calque of *Volkskunde* is not so straightforward.

Diarmuid Ó Giolláin recently reframed the issue in terms of influence rather than borrowing *per se* (2022: 98–99). He notes that "Thoms and his colleagues were also aware of Scandinavian works", which could have introduced them to, for example, the Swedish word *folkliiv* ['popular life'], attested already in 1817, and *folkminne(n)* ['popular memory'], attested in 1834 (2022: 99n.64). He further makes an observation that, to my knowledge, had not been entered into the discussion previously: that Thoms' word seems to be the first example of *folk-* used as the first element in a compound word formation in English (personal correspondence, 22.02.2022). This would be a strong indicator of foreign-language influence. Testing against the *Oxford English Dictionary* affirms Ó Giolláin's hypothesis; other words or expressions with *folk-* as the first element all first appear later:

<i>folk-song</i>	1847
<i>folk faith</i>	1850
<i>folk-life</i>	1864
<i>folk-wave</i>	1880
<i>folk-etymology</i>	1883
<i>folkcraft</i>	1884
<i>folk-law</i>	1884
<i>folk religion</i>	1884
<i>folk-hero</i>	1899
<i>folk-mind</i>	1899
<i>folk-music</i>	1889
<i>folk-psychology</i>	1889
<i>folk-rhyme</i>	1889
<i>folk-tale</i>	1891
<i>folk-belief</i>	1892
<i>folk-poetry</i>	1892
<i>folk-literature</i>	1893

<i>folk-medicine</i>	1898
<i>folk-singer</i>	1898
<i>folk-epic</i>	1904
<i>folk-play</i>	1905
<i>folkways</i>	1906
<i>folk-musician</i>	1907
<i>folk-singing</i>	1907
<i>folk-tune</i>	1907
<i>folk dancing</i>	1908
<i>folk-memory</i>	1908
<i>folk-legend</i>	1909
<i>folk-dance</i> (noun)	1909
<i>folk high school</i>	1914
<i>folk-drama</i>	1917
<i>folk-name</i>	1924
<i>folk-dance</i> (verb)	1927
<i>folk-dancer</i>	1936
<i>folk-culture</i>	1936
<i>folk-museum</i>	1936
<i>folk-players</i>	1936
<i>folk-poem</i>	1940
<i>folk-tradition</i>	1950

(*OED*, s.vv.)

Of course, using the *OED* in this way is not unproblematic. Some of the earliest examples identified by the dictionary are a bit late. For example, the *OED* identifies *folk-tale* as first attested in 1891, but W. R. S. Ralston published an article called “Notes on Folk-Tales” in the first number of *The Folk-Lore Record* in 1878. Digital search tools reveal that *folk-story* was used already a few years before that (Walhouse 1875: 24), an article with the title “Folk-Drama” appeared more than a quarter of a century before the *OED*’s 1917 date (Ordish 1891), and *folk-poem* is found already more than fifty years before 1940 (Anonymous 1888: 420). Nevertheless, Thoms does indeed seem to have been the first to use *folk-* as a prefix in English, which only boomed in usage with the founding of the Folk-Lore Society and publication of their journal *The Folk-Lore Record* in 1878.

Thoms’ use of *folk-* as a Germanic counterpart to the Romantic *popular* is fairly clearly attributable to foreign influence, and most likely to German in the wake of his fascination with Grimm’s *Deutsche Mythologie*. That his compound is adapted directly from *Volkskunde* is less clear. An issue with interpreting *folklore* as a calque of *Volkskunde* is a semantic disjunction. Thoms paraphrases *folklore* as “*the Lore of the People*”, and then describes the term as referring to the phenomenon but also to be used for the discipline (1846 [1946]: 361). German *-kunde* refers to learned knowledge or study as a vernacular equivalent to the etymologically Greek *-ology*; it refers exclusively to the field of study or discipline. *Volkskunde* is thus equivalent to *ethnology*, and

translating the *-kunde* or *-ology* of a people as referring to their ‘lore’ – that which a researcher collects and analyzes – requires either error or reimagination.

Thoms would later describe the proposed discipline of Folklore as a “branch of Archaeological study” (1850: 223). His description refers not to archaeology in the current sense, but as the study of things archaic or ancient, of which Grimm’s work stood as an exemplar. It is not clear that he would associate Grimm’s work with *Volkskunde* or *Völkerkunde* (i.e. with ‘people’ in the plural). In the first half of the nineteenth century, these German words did not necessarily have anything to do with folklore as such. August Eduard Preuß’s *Preußische Landes- und Volkskunde* (1835) is illustrative. Preuß uses *Volk-* for ‘people’, but in the sense of a population of the nation and its members, rather than in a sense of ‘popular’ or the later narrow sense of ‘folk’ as agenciless, non-modernized, heritage-bearing segments of the nation’s population. Preuß’s presentation of Prussian *Volkskunde* thus includes Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) as a famous national (1835: 328–331), whereas collective traditions are incidental to his presentation of the state’s land and population. Presentations of popular practices are found under *Volkskunde* or *Völkerkunde*. For example, Josef Rohrer’s *Uiber die Tiroler: Ein Beytrag zur Oesterreichischen Völkerkunde* (1796) [‘On the Tyrolians: A Contribution to Austrian *Völkerkunde*’] devotes chapter 3 to the artistic sense of the Tyrolians. Rohrer comments on the beauty of the Tyrolians poetry and of their singing, yet no texts are offered and it is not clear that what is described would qualify as ‘popular antiquities’ for a British readership. Viewed against common usage of *Volkskunde* prior to Reichl’s influential article (1858 [1862]), it is not clear that Thoms would even see it as relevant to his concept and coinage of *folklore*.

The evidence points to Thoms’ use of *folk-* as a calque of German *Volk-*, although it might also be a more general synthesis of parallels across Germanic languages. However, the limited and quite different use of *Volkskunde* and *Völkerkunde* up to that time do not support the interpretation of *folklore* as a calque of one of these German words. At best, *folklore* might be inspired by *Volkskunde*. Inspiration rather than a translation of the German word could account for Thoms’ claims that *folklore* is his own invention rather than a loan. Nevertheless, any relation of *-kunde* to Thoms’ coinage with *-lore* seems highly doubtful. The interpretation of *folklore* as a calque of *Volkskunde* appears to be anachronistically based on later usage of *Volkskunde*. Thoms’ model or inspiration has more likely come from elsewhere.

If Thoms’ coinage is situated in the 1846 context of its publication, its most probable source of origin or inspiration is Grimm’s *Deutsche Mythologie*. Thoms introduces the term and concept as the object of research of Grimm’s work, which he praises so highly, and which he advocates as the exemplar for folklore research. Thoms’ definition of

folklore as “the Lore of the People” (1846 [1946]: 361) should also be considered primary. Although Grimm had no concept of *folklore* in the sense used by Thoms, he used *Volksüberlieferung* as a general term for ‘tradition’. Thoms could easily have picked out *Volksüberlieferung* as referring to Grimm’s object of study and viewed it through the lens of Grimm’s much narrower research focus, which, for Thoms, converged with the contemporary English *popular antiquities*. Although *Überlieferung*, referring to that which has been passed on from an earlier generation, would more accurately be translated *tradition*, Thoms’ choice can be interpreted motivated by his ethno-national language ideology. In this case, Thoms would thus have consciously avoided *tradition* owing to its Latinate etymology, seeking “a good Saxon” (*loc.cit.*) counterpart. Thoms could have also calqued *Überlieferung* within his coinage, but the German word can easily look like as a calque of Latin *traditio*, and thus as not ‘authentically’ Germanic, while forming a compound from two simple nouns would appear more emblematic of Germanic languages and also more aesthetically suited to English. If this is roughly correct, Thoms’ use of the ‘native’ English word *lore* can be viewed as a creative activity of invention rather than simply as a translation of German *Volksüberlieferung*. Although *folklore* might still be interpreted as a calque of *Volksüberlieferung* by researchers, the role of creative intervention would account for Thoms’ objections to labelling his word a simple translation of a German word.

So: Is *folklore* a calque of *Volkskunde*? No, probably not. And yet, like many legends, there may be a kernel of truth in the idea. *Folklore* is quite possibly a translation of *Volksüberlieferung*, after passing through the filter of an ethno-nationalistic language ideology.

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