

A note on French voler "to steal"

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A NOTE ON FRENCH *VOLER* « TO STEAL »

There are a number of mysteries about the history of French *voler* « to steal ». One which is unlikely to be solved concerns the speed with which it and its substantival cognates displaced other words from popular favour. According to the relevant entry of that most valuable of French historical dictionaries, W. von Wartburg's *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, *volerie* « theft » is first attested in 1541, and *voler* itself, in the sense of « to steal », in 1549 — yet, by the early 17th century, *rober*, previously the most common term for « to steal », had been completely ousted (it is last attested in 1613)¹, and other words, such as *dérober*, *larroner* and *embler*, appear to have been far less widely used than *voler* itself. To attribute this meteoric rise of *voler* to its superior « expressivity » — which is almost all that one can do — is really to beg the question.

There is a further obscurity about the semantic history of the word. The traditional explanation of its etymology is that *voler* « to steal » is an extension of sense of *voler* « to fly », originating in the language of falconry². As Littré put it, back in 1889, « *voler*, au sens de dérober, est simplement une dérivation figurative de *voler*, 'chasser à l'oiseau'; on le dit à l'actif: *voler une perdrix* »³. Several other suggestions have been made. Diez' view⁴ was that *voler* « to steal » continues a Latin

1. Cf. *F. E. W.*, vol. XIV, p. 607 a.

2. Cf. E. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, vol. IV, Paris, 1889, p. 2536; A. Hatzfeld and A. Darmesteter, *Dictionnaire général de la langue française*, vol. II, Paris, n. d., p. 2260; W. Meyer-Lubke, *Romanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 3rd ed., Heidelberg, 1935, p. 788; A. Dauzat, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française*, Paris, 1938, p. 756 (the etymology remains unchanged in the revised and expanded edition published in 1964 by J. Dubois and H. Mitterand); O. Bloch and W. von Wartburg, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française*, 4th ed., 1964; W. von Wartburg, *Französisches etymologisches wörterbuch*, Fasc. 76/77, Basel, 1961, p. 617 a; and P. Robert, *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*, vol. VI, Paris, 1964, p. 1038.

3. *Op. cit.*, p. 2536.

4. *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der romanischen Sprachen, Zweiter Teil*, 2nd ed., Bonn, 1862, p. 273 (under *emblem*).

volare deriving by apheresis from *involare* (which > *emblem* in Old French). This derivation was decisively — and rightly — rejected by Littré on the grounds that not only was *volare* in this sense not attested in Latin, but that it was inconceivable that the word should have been in oral use since late Latin times and appeared in writing only in the 16th century¹. More worthy of attention are the suggestions put forward at different periods by Ernst Gamillscheg. In his *Französische Bedeutungslehre*², he expressed the view that the shift in sense of *voler* arose out of the euphemistic use of a factitive *voler* « davon fliegen machen ». In his earlier *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der französischen Sprache*, he had spoken of probable borrowing from thieves' slang, and also, taking up a suggestion by Pirson in the *Mélanges Wilmotte*, of the possibility of the word being a 16th-century latinism based on Latin *vola* « palm of the hand »³. It is not made clear whether these two suggestions are to be taken as complementary or as mutually exclusive. In any case, *voler* does not strike one as a likely latinism: why should anyone have returned in the 16th century to Lat. *vola* in order to render the idea of theft, when there were plenty of Latin words which meant « to steal »⁴? The possibility of borrowing from slang, on the other hand, is not incompatible with Gamillscheg's later reference to « euphemistic usage »: the starting-point of the process remains in both cases the postulated use of a factitive *voler* in the sense « davon fliegen machen ».

The only plausible suggestions put forward, therefore, agree in regarding *voler* « to steal » as an extension of sense of *voler* « to fly », and whether we place the origins of the shift of sense in the linguistic usage of falconers or of criminals — or, for that matter, of the population at large — the first stage of the process appears to involve a transition from intransitive to transitive (or factitive) use of the word. It is here that difficulties arise again. If we except the rather special type of construction *voler un faucon* attested in Froissart's works⁵, the earliest recorded example of transitive *voler* in the language of falconry⁶ dates from 1570, twenty-

1. *Op. cit.*, p. 2536.

2. Tübingen, 1951, p. 130.

3. *Op. cit.*, Heidelberg, 1928, p. 896 (under *vol*).

4. The borrowing *vole* < *vola* appears in a few 16th-century texts, but in its etymological sense of « palm of the hand » (cf. *F. E. W.* XIV, p. 597 a).

5. Cf. *F. E. W.*, XIX, p. 605b.

6. Von Wartburg quotes (*F. E. W.*, XIV, p. 607 a) the following passage from

one year after the first attestation of transitive *voler* in the sense of « to steal »¹. In his *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, W. von Wartburg maintains that the falconer's use of transitive *voler* must have existed earlier, since the development of *voler* « to steal » is explained by it². If no other explanation were possible, this would be a valid assumption — but we cannot take the « falconry usage » theory as proved: the view that the shift occurred in slang or popular speech cannot be discarded out of hand. The only evidence in favour of the traditional explanation is the existence of transitive phrases of the type *voler la perdrix*, which are attested later than *voler* « to steal ». Phrases of this type may have occurred earlier than the known documents suggest, but this is also true of *voler* « to steal » — in fact, in the latter case we know that this is so, since *volerie* « theft » is attested in 1541 (as against the 1549 attestation for *voler* « to steal »). It does in fact seem more probable that a slang term should have remained unattested in writing for some time than one used in the language of falconry, which has quite a voluminous literature. This is, admittedly, mere speculation. A valid point, however, would seem to be that *voler*, as used in such phrases as *voler la perdrix*, means « to hunt » and not « to steal ». For the poacher, of course, the two might be synonymous, but it seems open to doubt whether poachers in the Middle Ages made any great use of hunting birds, the ownership of which tended to be the prerogative of the nobles. Terms such as *dupe(r)*, *leurre(r)*, Middle Fr. *pipier*, *flageoler* and *frouer/flouer*, which passed into colloquial speech, are connected with the humbler sphere of the fowler, with his nets and decoys, rather than with the « noble » art of falconry. For the falconer, then, the normal sense of *voler la perdrix* would seem to have been « to hunt (or catch) a partridge with a hawk or falcon », without any implication of theft. The development of this transitive use of *voler* in falconry can therefore only be regarded as the first stage in the process by which *voler* « to fly » becomes *voler* « to steal ». The chronological discrepancy of some thirty years between the appearance of *volerie* « theft » and of transitive *voler* in falconry is thus aggravated by the fact that the

C. Estienne's *L'agriculture et maison rustique*: « Ils [les oiseaux de chasse] ne volent indifféremment tous oyseaux, mais un chacun d'eux s'attache à l'oyseau, à la chasse duquel il est addonné ».

1. In the 1549 edition of R. Estienne's *Dictionnaire françois latin* (cf. *F. E. W.*, XIV, p. 606 a).

2. *Op. cit.*, p. 607 a.

earlier attestation reflects a later stage of semantic development than the one drawn from the sphere of falconry.

Another possible argument for the view that *voler* « to steal » has its origins in the language of falconry is the apparent parallel between its development (« fly > « fly after, pounce upon » > « steal ») and that of Latin *involare*¹. But did *involare* actually acquire its sense through such a series of changes? It is impossible to be categorical on such a point, but it would seem at least as plausible that *involare* is a derivative of *vola*, and therefore originally meant « to palm, to take in the hand »².

All this does not disprove the traditional hypothesis, but it would seem fair to say that it does not seem to be any better substantiated than Gamillscheg's references to « euphemistic usage » and « thieves' slang ». Gamillscheg's view has a certain inherent plausibility, but is unsupported by any direct evidence whatsoever; on the other hand, the present evidence used to bolster up the traditional theory is, as I have tried to show, desperately weak. Both hypotheses, furthermore, suffer from the further weakness that they do not attempt to explain in any way the transition from intransitive to transitive (or factitive) uses of *voler*, the first stage in the postulated development. It may have been felt that such developments are sufficiently frequent for this stage to present no particular problem — but this seems a moot point.

The processes by which *voler* acquired the sense of « to steal » therefore remain sufficiently obscure to justify the formulation of any hypothesis which could shed any further light on the history of the word, including its passage from intransitive to transitive use. I should like to draw attention to the possible relevance of homonymic association and synonymic derivation. The latter is, as is well known, a common feature of modern colloquial usage: for instance, the appearance of the word *poire* as a colloquial designation of the head has led in French slang to the « relaying » of the metaphor to a whole series of fruit-names of greater or lesser appropriateness (*pomme, citron, fraise, mûre, cassis*, etc.), while the use of *polir* in the sense of « to steal » inspired a similar extension of sense in a variety of other verbs referring to cleaning and polishing

1. Cf. O. Bloch and W. von Wartburg, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française*, 4th ed., p. 217 (under *emblée*).

2. On this point Ernout and Meillet, in their *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine* (3rd ed., Paris, 1951, I, p. 574) support von Wartburg, basing their argument partly on the alleged parallel development of fr. *voler* — which seems a doubtful support!

(*fourbir, nettoyer, rincer*, etc.)¹. The relevance of this stylistic device to our particular problem will not be immediately apparent. Its possible importance rests on the homonymy of *embler* « to deceive, to cozen, to steal » and its derivatives *embleur* and *emblerie*, on the one hand, and *ambler* « to amble », *aller l'amble* « to ride at walking pace », etc., on the other. Because of the formal merger of the two groups, an association was created between words referring to « stealing » and words referring to « ambling ». True, *ambler* was intransitive, and *embler* transitive, but this would not prevent *embleur* from appearing to be a synonym of « walker, ambler », or, indeed, prevent *embler* from being seen by some as a factitive form of *ambler* — i.e. as meaning « to cause to walk ». Given this association, it would be a simple step to extend it from one verb of motion to another which seemed to render more vividly and appropriately the speed and dexterity of the practised thief. In any case, synonymic derivation shows a tendency towards exaggeration or reinforcement: English slang expressions for « to steal », for instance, include a series showing « gradation » from the earlier *to nip* and *to pinch*, through such terms as *to nick*, to modern slang expressions like *to whip*².

In the modern period, synonymic derivation has flourished above all in slang, with its very marked demand for novelty in the lexical sphere. It does not appear to have been very common in the Middle Ages, at least to judge from the material presented in L. Sainéan's *Sources de l'argot ancien*³. This may be partly due to the fact that we are necessarily less well-informed than we might be about the popular speech of the period. This type of derivation was, however, not unknown, even in texts of a more literary nature. In his *Three Studies in Homonymics*, John Orr draws attention to a case which in its combination of homonymic association and synonymic derivation parallels the development which I have postulated for *voler*⁴. Phonetic changes had turned O. Fr. *pance* « belly »

1. Cf. P. Guiraud, *L'argot*, Paris, 1958, p. 56 f, S. Ullmann, *The Principales of Semantics*, Glasgow, 1951, p. 228.

2. According to E. Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, 4th ed., London, 1951, *nip* in this sense is first attested in 1570, *pinch* in c. 1670, *nick* in 1826 and *whip* in c. 1917 (cf. *op. cit.*, Supplement, p. 1221).

3. 2 vols., Paris, 1912.

4. *Op. cit.*, Edinburgh, 1962, p. 60 f. The « Notes to 'On Homonymics' » containing the passage referred to were first published in *Words and Sounds in English and French*, Oxford, 1953: cf. p. 157 f of that work.

and *pense* « thought » into homonyms, and it is to this formal identity that Professor Orr attributes the fact that *dire sa pensee* (taken by some speakers at least as referring to what one had in the *panse*) is paralleled by a series of phrases referring to parts of the body: *dire sa testee*, *dire sa gorgee*, *dire sa ratelee*. The association of *pensee* with *panse* and other names of parts of the body is borne out by quotations such as: *Non seulement par pansee/Par fortune ne par testee/Mes par veoir de l'uil vraiment* (J. de Priorat, *Liv. de Végèce*, cit. Godefroy). As Orr suggests in a later article¹, the homonymic ambiguity of *panse/pense* may have operated at two levels, that of the unsophisticated speaker and that of the more sophisticated punster.

The partly unconscious, partly jocular association of [ãmbler] « to amble » and « to steal » may, then, account for the development of the sense *voler* « to steal ». We may express the possible development diagrammatically:

Stage 1 (following the phonetic fusion of *ambler* « to amble » and *embler* « to steal, to deceive »)

$[\text{ãmbler}] \left\{ \begin{array}{l} 1. \text{ v. intr. "to amble"} \\ 2. \text{ v. tr. "to steal"} \end{array} \right.$	$[\text{vòler}] \left\{ \begin{array}{l} 1. \text{ v. intr. "to fly"} \\ \text{— (case vide)} \end{array} \right.$
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Stage 2 ([ãbler] « to steal » interpreted as factitive « to cause to walk »)

$[\text{ãbler}] \left\{ \begin{array}{l} 1. \text{ v. intr. "to amble"} \\ 2. \text{ v. tr. "to steal"} \end{array} \right.$	$[\text{vòler}] \left\{ \begin{array}{l} 1. \text{ v. intr. "to fly"} \\ 2. \text{ v. tr. "to steal"} \\ \text{("to cause to fly")} \end{array} \right.$
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The suggested development is in line with Gamillscheg's view that the extension in the sense of *voler* occurred in slang (although I should prefer to speak merely of « colloquial usage »). My interpretation, like his, remains a pure hypothesis, but I should like to think that it sheds more light on the various stages of the process and their possible motivation.

Belfast.

N. C. W. SPENCE.

1. Cf. « On Homonymics », *Archivum Linguisticum*, XVI (1964). I am grateful to Professor Orr for allowing me to read this in manuscript form.