

# L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE  
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

3

ANNO XXXII 2024

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# THE WORD TABOO IN LANGUAGES AND CULTURES: THE CASE OF PROTO-INDO-EUROPEAN “LEFT”<sup>1</sup>

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This paper deals with the word taboo and seeks to investigate such a concept from the view point of theoretical and cognitive linguistics and through the lens of linguistic anthropology. As for a case study, the article focuses on the meaning of the taboo behind the concept and words for ‘left’ in Proto-Indo-European. Next to the most common idea of [WORSE, IMPURE] then [DEFECATION], clearly stated in some texts and even in present-day superstition practices and habits of several world civilizations, ancient Indo-European texts do reveal some hints for another taboo. This taboo exhibits a meaning in the sphere of manhood and masculinity, involving male characterizations, such as the genitals and homoerotic intercourse. The study is carried out in the frame of linguistic anthropology, because all the imperfect phonological matches between Indo-European ‘left’-words and types find an explanation in the substitution or neutralization processes of word taboo.

*Keywords:* Word Taboo, Proto-Indo-European ‘left’ and Metaphoric Language, Ideology of Masculinity, Cognitive Metaphor and Linguistics, Culture and Anthropology

## 1. Introduction: Taboo between Life and Cognition

The word *taboo* comes from Polynesian languages, reconstructed in Proto-Oceanic as \**tabu* [ta.<sup>m</sup>bu] (Adj) ‘forbidden, unapproachable’, with a complex semantic history that covers various areas of sacredness and religion (François 2022, 245–246).

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgement: The topic of this paper consists of the first part of a talk I presented on November 13, 2020 at the conference *Form and Meaning: Nominal Word Formation and Derivational Semantics in Indo-European* organized at the University of Copenhagen, during my 2019–2020 extended Research Fellowship at Harvard University’s Center for Hellenic Studies. Then, I presented a revised and updated version on January 7, 2023 at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Classical Studies in New Orleans, LA (USA) within the panel *Greek and Latin Languages and Linguistics*. Over the years and during the talks, I benefitted from the comments, suggestions, criticisms of many scholars and friends, all of whom I thank, in particular Sasha Lubotsky (Leiden University) who patiently read a preliminary version of this research: He should not be taken to share the views expressed. Morphological analysis follows the Leipzig glossing system. Language and author/text abbreviations can be identified at the end of the paper. Translations in the paper are mine. It is understood that the responsibility for the whole research and for any mistake is of course solely mine.

Present-day languages have soon integrated it in their vocabularies as a loanword, which has been widely used to express the concept of a sacred prohibition and the consequences of such a transgression. From a cognitive and anthropological viewpoint, taboos may be viewed as cultural products of evolved psychological intuitions (Hong 2024, 727). For the purposes of this article, I will focus only on the aspect of naming a taboo and the polarity conception of universe.

### 1.1 “Nomen atque omen”

There is a common belief according to which uttering the names of things or persons may evoke their powers. Indeed, Plautus’ famous proverb (*Persa* 625) *nōmen atque ōmen* [a name is also a presage] exemplifies well this concept. It can be traced back to the magic power of words and personal names in religion and daily life (compare ethnographic and linguistic studies of Calame-Griaule [2009, 345–356], then Astori [2012] and Muscianisi [in press]).

Cultural anthropologists generally refer to such a language use within the social act of speech. Linguistic anthropology notices that words acquire different significances according to the way and context of usage, thus according to the pragmatics of language (Duranti 1997, 221–222).

The “context of situation” involves different cognitive and cultural issues, which create a different communicative outcome (Matras 2000, 91–95). This use concerns the pragmatic use of utterances, the embodiment of them and their semiotic reanalysis through metaphors and cultural (thus, societally constructed) beliefs, thoughts and taboos (Tambiah 1985, 53).

### 1.2 Polarities and Word Taboos

Human beings exhibit a tendency to structure their thoughts and lives in a binary opposition of elements. Thus, there are pairs of opposite concepts, such as good and evil, sky and earth, light and darkness, life and death, gods and humans, male and female, old and young people, the opposing directions on the compass, sunrise and sunset, as well as right opposed to left.

Polarities also give birth to a list of what items are considered positive and negative (see Astori [2017, 15–17] for balance of polarities in *Genesis*). Thus, elements like good, heaven, sunrise, life, light, right are placed in the positive polarity, while their opposites are viewed as negative. The negative polarity, indeed, lapses into linguistic interdictions, in order to avoid the *ōmen* ‘presage’ evocation of the *nōmen* ‘name’, as in §2.3 below.

Cultures create taboos concerning activities, animals, food and potentially every social act, since societies “live their taboos before thinking them” (Tambiah 1985, 211). Tambiah’s statement concerns the fact that taboos are ubiquitous in human social life and serve as powerful tools to regulate human action, and sometimes to control it.

It is important to underline that from a cultural anthropological point of view the positive and negative characteristics associated with each polarity are due to a random choice made at societal level: the same ‘thing’ can bring on itself more than a single characteristic and even contradictory, like in Ancient Egyptian where the root  $\sqrt{j^3b}$  yields both  $j^3b.j$  (Adj) ‘left’ (inauspicious) and  $j^3bt.t$  ‘east’ (favorable) (see Müller 2012, 354; Pezin, Janot 1995).

Moreover, polarities do not necessarily occur together: sometimes there is an original polarity, but only one side has been transmitted in human societies and ideologies. This is the topic of the case study of the present article about a lost and hidden possible meaning of Proto-Indo-European “left”.

### 1.3 Right and Left: a New Linguistic Anthropological Approach

One of the polarities with the most well-defined taboo is that of [RIGHT] and [LEFT]. Thanks to a linguistic anthropological approach, in Indo-European it is possible to identify a sexual taboo behind “left” which concerns male sex and genitalia. This taboo was variously hidden or reconfigured with a positive aspect by some languages and branches. Then, thanks to historical linguistics, a later stem of Proto-Indo-European can be found. This stem residually appears across various branches in words or glosses related to sexual intercourse and/or male (homo)sexuality.

In PIE right–left symbolism, [RIGHT] holds the positive polarity: it is favorable, more honorable and proper (Hertz 1960). Linguistically speaking, “right” shows throughout the same shared word-formation, namely a relic base *\*deks(-i)-* from a secondary static *s*-stem (LOC.SG *\*CéC-s(-i)-*) on PIE *\*dek-* ‘to accept, receive’ and three possible suffixes: *\*-uó-* (Gr. *dexiós*, Myc. /*Deksiwo-*/, Goth. *taihswa*), *\*-no-* (OIA *dákṣiṇa-*, OCS *desnǫ*) and *\*-tero-* (Gr. *dexiterós* and the Thera epithet *Dékteros*). Such formations can be found in onomastics, adverbs and other forms (see Muscianisi [2020, 235–238] for all Indo-European forms and the full argumentation).

The left side concerns the negative polarity and, among Indo-European cultures, even an ethically negative conception. Just giving a glance at the PIE lexicon for “left”, already Carl Buck (1949, 865–866) noticed that there was not a shared form in the daughter languages. Although Buck has drawn attention to the word taboo, he did not investigate the taboo itself and kept the description within a Graeco-centric and lexicon-based viewpoint. Greek is the only branch that shows such a taboo stronger than other branches, testifying a profusion of coinages for “left”-words until the fixation of the present-day language (Muscianisi 2020, 236; see §2.3 below)<sup>2</sup>.

Traditional right-left opposition sees the positive value to the right and the negative one to the left. In Old Indo-Aryan tradition, right hand is used to eat, as variously stated in Brahmanic tradition, such as *dákṣiṇena hy ánnam adyáte* ‘thus, the food is eaten with the right hand’ (KB 12.10), because the left hand concerns the opposite, thus [DEFECATION, EXCREMENT]. This concept is still alive in present-day South Asian belief and it is shared with West African Dogon tradition from Mali. In Tommo So language, “right hand” is said *nùmǎ<sup>L</sup> jýé* from *jýé* ‘to eat’, and “left hand” is said *nùmǎ<sup>L</sup> nààndá* from *nààndá* ‘area at the edge of the village for defecating’, while *nùmǎ<sup>L</sup>* means ‘hand’ (McPherson 2013, 248).

<sup>2</sup> At the time of the submission of my research (fall 2019), the content of the article by Giannakis was unknown to me and the book was yet unavailable: this explains the absence of Giannakis (2019) in Muscianisi (2020). Although the development of Buck’s taboo idea has been shared by Giannakis and me, the two investigations have taken completely different and independent ways. There are further studies on spatiality of right and left, as cardinal points, in Indo-European from a cognitive linguistics point of view, namely Bartolotta (2020; 2022).



## 2. 'Left': the Linguistic Evidence

After Buck, this topic has not been investigated in great depth. There is a recapitulation of Buck's dictionary made by Josef Elfenbein (2005, 73–75), then there are two attempts at systematizing PIE “left” and right-left relation, namely by Robert Beekes (1994, 89) and by Karin Stüber (2006, 67–69). As for PIE “left”, Beekes made a discussion on the possibly inherited and comparable forms without any real etymological reconstruction. Stüber attempted a purely phonological reconstruction of the PIE forms, both for “right” and for “left”.

### 2.1 The Problems of a Pure Phonological Analysis

As for PIE “left”, apart from the interesting connection between “shade, shadow” (Gr. *skia*, OIA *chāyā́-*) and the *skaiós*-type of “left”, I find myself unpersuaded by Stüber's (2006, 67) reconstructed scenario, namely the proto-forms *\*skab<sub>2</sub>iuo-* and *\*lab<sub>2</sub>iuo-*, because it appears to me more a transposition of Greek *skaiós*, *laiós* and Latin *scaeuus*, *laeuus* than a reconstruction<sup>3</sup>.

In fact, the Slavic material has been quickly described as analogical formations, but the components of this analogy are not explained; Celtic and Tocharian material is entirely absent from that investigation. In Stüber's PIE right-left relation, there is a paradoxical scenario from the viewpoint of cultural anthropology, where inauspicious “left” would have a single and almost clear word-formation, while the favorable “right” would attest an uneconomical profusion of suffixes and analogical influence of the less honorable side (Muscianisi 2020, 235–236).

### 2.2 The Forms of a Taboo

As for linguistic interdiction, languages operate mostly in two ways: either (1) they distort the phonological or morphological features of the tabooed words, proceeding through analogy in phonology and semantics (Vennemann 1972), or (2) they substitute the tabooed word with neologisms, until the taboo prevails again (Burriage, Benczes 2018, 189–192). Indo-European languages produced a great number of “left”-words as attested over the chronological stages of languages in each branch (Buck 1949, 865–867; Beekes 1994, 87).

Through the different branches, PIE “left”-words show certain linguistic connections and can be classified into three types. These I more easily identify through the form of the most ancient language of each group, namely Old Indo-Aryan (type I) and Greek (types II and III): Type I will be the so-called *savyá*-type, Type II the *skaiós*-type, while Type III will be the *laiós*-type. Here, the following Table 1 collects the cognate forms. Phonological imperfect matches have to reascend at the tabooing distortion process:

<sup>3</sup> For a good survey of the issue and further bibliographical reference, see Beekes (2010, 2: 1339) and Giannakis (2019, 255–258). The latter has reconstructed the same “left”-forms as in Stüber's article without mentioning it and has added some Anatolian material, albeit etymologically unrelated with the forms presented here.

Table 1 - “Left” in the Indo-European Languages

	OIA	YAv.	ToB	Gr.	Lat.	OCS	Celtic	
<b>type I</b>	savyá- (RV+)	haoiia-	saiw-ai	/	/	šui	<b>MW</b>	a-sw(y)
<b>type II</b>	/	/	/	skaiós (Hom.+)	scaeuus (Plaut.+)	/	<b>MIr.</b> <b>MW</b>	citt-ach chwith
<b>type III</b>	/	/	laiwo	laiós (Tyrt.+)	laeuus (Enn.+)	лѣвъ	/	/

### 2.2.1 Type I: Morphology and Chronology

The so-called *savyá*-type shows a peripheral distribution in Indo-European, namely Indo-Iranian, Tocharian, Slavic and Celtic, that may even be clue to an earlier chronology of this “left”-type. From a morphological point of view “left”-type I witnesses a PIE adjectival suffix *\*-iǝ-*, as in OIA *-yá-*, YAv. *-iia-*, OCS *-i-*, and MW *-y*; while ToB *-ai* is an adverbial suffix, synchronically attesting a locative grammaticalization.

Although it is hard to recognize the derivation, operating with transpositions it can be noticed a similarity with PIE *\*seu-* ‘to press, squeeze’ (*LIV*<sup>2</sup>, 537, compare OIA  $\sqrt{sav}$  in *EWAia* 2: 713). Thus, PIE *\*seu-iǝ-* (Adj) would have had a proto-meaning as *\*related to pressing, squeezing*. Alexander Lubotsky (1988, 90) has a different opinion reconstructing *\*(h<sub>1</sub>)seu-iǝ-* after the assumption of a tabooed derivation from PIE *\*h<sub>1</sub>su-* (Adv) ‘good’ (OIA *su-*, Myc. /e<sup>h</sup>u-/).

In particular, taboo effects can be seen in Tocharian B stem *\*saiw-* (mechanically reconstructed as *\*seiu-*) attesting a metathesis of PIE *\*seuiǝ-* (Winter 1985, 590). Finally, Celtic forms consist of Middle Welsh *a-sw(y)* with Middle Breton *hasou* ‘left’ and Modern Breton *asow* ‘favorable, venerable’, all of which attest a regular phonological outcome from PCelt. *\*as-sou-ǝ-* (PIE *\*seu-iǝ-*). Taboo effects are shown by the presence of prefix *\*ad-* (compare Lat. *ad* ‘to(wards)’; see §4.1 below) and in the positive semantic transformation in Modern Breton.

### 2.2.2 Type II: Morphology and Chronology

The second – likely even chronologically – PIE “left” is the so-called *skaiós*-type, where the taboo force seems to have had a stronger influence on the formation and the semantics of the words.

In Greek *skaiós* and Latin *scaeuus*, morphemes appear the same (see §4 below): a PIE suffix *\*-uǝ-* on a base *\*skai-* (possibly transposable as PIE *\*skh<sub>2</sub>(e)i-*). This structure looks very similar to “left”-type III (see §2.2.3 below), namely with Lat. *laeuus* and Gr. *laiós*.

Celtic material shows a more complex morphological situation. Middle Irish attests the form *citt-ach* ‘left-hander, awkward’, which is a derivative with PCelt. substantivizer *\*-āko-*, thus originally meaning *\*‘having left-quality, awkward-quality’*. Thus, MIr. *\*citt-* (Adj) ‘left, awkward’ and MW *chwith* (N) ‘left(-handed), sad, wrong, sinister’ likely witness a PIE *\*tó-*

suffix. On pure phonological grounds: a problematic Proto-Celtic base  $*(s)k\check{i}tt-$  or  $*(s)k\check{e}tt-$  must be assumed (Schrijver 2003, 4–5; Matasović 2009, 342–343).

In the frame of word taboo changes, Mlr.  $*citt-$  can be transposed as PCelt.  $*k\check{i}tto-$  and MW *chwith* as  $*ks\check{i}tto-$ . Then, assuming the same PIE base  $*skh_2(e)i-$  mentioned above, Proto-Celtic forms can match if they may come from (1) PIE  $*(s)kh_2i-$  > PCelt.  $*ki-$  or PIE  $*(s)kih_2-$  > PCelt.  $*k\check{i}-$  + PIE  $*-t\acute{o}-$  would give Mlr.  $*citt-$  ‘left’, and (2) PIE  $*ksb_2i-$  > PCelt.  $*xsi-$  + PIE  $*-t\acute{o}-$  would give MW *chwith* ‘left’ (compare Schrijver 2003, 20–21). Metathesis of phonemes, including laryngeals, vowel lengthening and unexpected geminations are known to PIE phonological changes, even more so within the linguistic interdiction and cultural taboo of [LEFT].

Without explicitly stating so, Matasović (2009, 343) seems to favour the interpretation just mentioned. For my part, I think that imperfect phonological matches find their explanations in the frame of linguistic anthropology and through word taboo (compare Giannakis 2019, 235–236 and *GPC* s.v. *chwith*). On the contrary, Schrijver goes for the lack of relationship between Irish and Welsh forms, interpreting MW *chwith* as a verbal adjective on PIE  $*k^{(w)}seib^b-$  ‘to move curvingly’ (Schrijver 2003, 14, 23; compare also *LIV*<sup>2</sup>, 373). However, I find myself unpersuaded by this etymology, because the tabooed semantic changes become the original etymology, but just for Welsh; nevertheless, some awkwardness on the phonological layer persists.

### 2.2.3 Type III: Morphology and Chronology

The third “left”-type is the most recent one to appear. It has a limited distribution and even a kind of specialized use from the point of view of semantics and textual attestation. The morphology seems almost clear, showing a shared PIE  $*u\acute{o}$ -suffix on a base  $*lai-$  which is valid for all four languages attesting the *laiós*-type for “left”, namely Latin, Old Church Slavonic, Tocharian B and Greek. The non-Attic outcome of PGr.  $*\acute{u}$  is attested in Hesychius λ 116 *λαίβα· ἄσπίς· πέλεκυ* ‘shield’ as ‘the weapon hold with the left hand’ (Chantraine 1956, 62).

There is, finally, ToB *laiwo* (N) ‘fatigue, tiredness, lassitude’, that has already been connected with “left” by Albert Van Windekens (1976, 253–254). Of a different opinion is Václav Blažek (1995, 234), who finds the semantics difficult to compare and proposes a Slavic parallel with Proto-Slavic  $*l\acute{e}viti$  meaning ‘to weaken, diminish (Ukrainian, Czech), to waste time (Serbo-Croatian)’.

Although favoring Blažek’s hypothesis, Adams (2013, 612) is contiguous with the possibility of a nominal derivation of Proto-Slavic  $*l\acute{e}viti$ . The basis of such a derivation could be Proto-Slavic  $*l\acute{e}v\bar{o}$  ‘left’ (= OCS *lěvŏ*) without formal difficulties, thus Van Windekens’ (1976, 253–254) hypothesis is still valid and the preferred one here, both on linguistic and anthropological grounds.

## 2.3 The Persistence of the Word Taboo behind “Left”

To sum up the linguistic evidence for PIE “left”, the presence of words can somehow delineate the force and the persistence of the linguistic taboo. The oldest branches, namely

Indo-Iranian and Hellenic, adopted types I and II respectively: in fact, those “left”-types are witnessed in their old and oldest texts, the *R̥gveda* (*savyá-*), the *Avestā* (*haoiia-*) and the Homeric poems (*skaiós*).

Such taboo words had a very specific meaning, namely OIA *savyá-* in the *R̥gveda* is mostly or exclusively expressed as opposite to *dákṣiṇa-* ‘right’ in a spacial or body-related context. The words have been rapidly substituted in Indo-Iranian with euphemistic words, namely OIA *váma-* (ŠBr+) ‘left’ from  $\sqrt{van}$  ‘to love, desire’, already in Vedic times, and YAv. *vairiia.stāra-* \*‘the one, that stays [ $\sqrt{stā-}_1$ ] at the more desirable side [ $\sqrt{var-}_2$ ]’ → ‘left’ (*AirW*, 1373). Furthermore, Tocharian witnesses a radical lexical change in “left” between the B variant attesting the *savyá*-type to the Tocharian A, with its new set of words for the whole right-left symbolism (Winter 1985; Adams 2013, 767).

As for Old Church Slavonic, word *šui* ‘left’ occurs very limitedly in the Biblical texts and always in its spatial meaning as ‘to the left (side)’ opposed to the OCS *desnǔ* ‘right (side)’, thus in a situation very similar to *R̥gvedic savyá-* ‘left’ (compare Vasmer 1964–1973, 4: 484).

Greek witnesses a peculiar situation because of its profusion of neologisms for “left”, broader than other Indo-European cognate branches. This is due to the force of the linguistic taboo, which shows its strength for much longer in the history of the Greek language.

The inherited “left”-words have a relatively limited occurrence in literature. Type II *skaiós* is attested in Homeric poems and conveys mostly a spacial idea of “left”; while type III *laiós* is found later from poet Tyrtaeus (7<sup>th</sup> century BCE) onwards. This is mostly attested in military contexts and seems to concern a Doric area of distribution. Very soon the “standard” Greek words for ‘left’ have become the euphemisms *aristerós* considered in Greek sources as ‘the best one’ and *euónumos* ‘the well-named one’ (see Chantraine [1956] for detailed information within philology, linguistics and language history).

#### 2.4 Male Sexuality: The Meaning of a Taboo

Within the frame of linguistic anthropology, I investigate the “left” taboo in Proto-Indo-European, trying to argue that there was also a meaning of the taboo concerning masculinity, male sexuality and genitals in Proto-Indo-European. Hints and traces of such a taboo meaning can be found in some textual sources of the historical languages, before they operated their individual substitutions.

Among all linguistic taboo processes, semantics plays an important role, because speakers mainly change the meanings of the tabooed words according to formal or phonetic similarities with other words across various semantic fields: such a process falls within the frame of folk-etymology, which is the oldest process of language analysis and study and the most valuable one within ancient cultures (compare Morpurgo Davies [1987] and, for Armenian case studies, Martirosyan [2024]).

As far as “left” is concerned, I have been able to establish some folk-etymological matches, connecting “left”-words and in particular their roots with the concept of masculinity and male sexuality, namely in Indic *R̥gveda* (§3), in Plautus’ comedy and Latin antiquities (§4) and in Greek lexicography and medical-philosophical language (§5).

### 3. Old Indo-Aryan: Left-Type I, Sex and Soma

Folk-etymology finds a perfect setting in Old Indo-Aryan, where three roots show very similar phonological and semantic features, namely  $\sqrt{sav}$  ‘to press, squeeze’,  $\sqrt{sav}^i_1$  ‘to generate, give birth’ and  $\sqrt{sav}^i_2$  ‘to enliven, impel’ (*EWAlia* 2: 713–716). Especially between the two homophonous *set* roots, many verbal voices and both verbal and nominal derivatives (even secondary new formations) show exactly the same forms and the semantics is also sometimes mixed. For example, 3PL.PRS.IND.MID *súvate* or *prá... súvate* can equally be both ‘they are generated’ from  $\sqrt{sav}^i_1$  and ‘they are impelled’ from  $\sqrt{sav}^i_2$  (Gotō 1991, 698 n138); 3SG.PF.IND.MID *susuvé* can trace back to  $\sqrt{sav}$ , thus ‘it has been pressed’, and  $\sqrt{sav}^i_1$ , meaning ‘it has been generated’ (Gotō 1991, 695 n120). Although vowel length differences, PPP *sutá-* and *sūtá-* are mixed with all three roots in some texts, thus equally ‘pressed, extracted’ phonologically from  $\sqrt{sav}$  ‘to press’, then ‘consecrated’ from  $\sqrt{sav}^i_2$  ‘to impel’ (Gotō 1991, 696 n128). Then, noun *suta-* means both ‘Soma juice’ from  $\sqrt{sav}$  and ‘child’ from  $\sqrt{sav}^i_1$  ‘to give birth’ (Gotō 1991, 700 n152).

The derivative noun *savá-* (transposable as *\*sou(H)-ó-*) is attested from the *Rgveda* to classical Sanskrit with the meaning of all the three roots mentioned above, namely the ‘pressing out’ of the Soma juice (RV+, from  $\sqrt{sav}$ ), the ‘sun’ as ‘stimulator, impeller’ (from  $\sqrt{sav}^i_2$ ), but also the ‘vivifier’ (from  $\sqrt{sav}^i_1$ ) still in Vedic times, and later ‘progeny’ (from  $\sqrt{sav}^i_1$ ) in classical Sanskrit, which is likely a secondary formation.

The mixture of the three OIA roots mentioned above in the texts mirrors the uncertainty in reconstruction from a PIE perspective, where the scholarship generally reconstruct OIA  $\sqrt{sav}$  < PIE *\*seu-* ‘to press, squeeze’, OIA  $\sqrt{sav}^i_1$  < PIE *\*seuH-* ‘to generate, give birth’ and OIA  $\sqrt{sav}^i_2$  < PIE *\*seuh<sub>1</sub>-* ‘to enliven, to impel’ (for an etymological survey concerning the laryngeals, see *LIV*<sup>2</sup>, 537–539; *EWAlia* 2: 713–716; Kloekhorst 2008, 773–774).

#### 3.1 The Hymn of the Soma-Pressing

In one of the hymns telling about the pressing of the Soma (RV 1.28), the most important ritual and liturgic beverage in Vedic ritual with a psychoactive value, there is no mention of “left”. However, there is a folk-linguistic use of the OIA roots mentioned above that shows some allusions to male sexuality and virility (see §2.4 above).

*Rgveda* 1.28 is dedicated to Indra who prepares the Soma by pressing it in a mortar. Bernfried Schlerath (2002) interprets the Soma-pressing as a metaphorical description of a sexual act and is followed by Schmidt (2009). To this interpretation I add some poetic and linguistic anthropological comments which strengthen the linguistic interdiction of [LEFT]:

RV 1.28.1; 6

(1) When the large-based [*pr̥thú-budhma-*] stone becomes erect **for the pressing** [*sótave:PRS.INF*] of the mortar-pressed [*ulúkhala-suta-*] (substances/drops), then you, O Indra, will swallow [*jalgulah:3SG.INTS.SBJ.ACT*] (them). [...] (6) Thus, to you, **O Lord of the Wood** [*vanaspate:VOC.SG*], the wind blows upon (your) **summit** [*ágra-*]. Now, O mortar [*ulúkhala-*], press [*sunú:2SG.PRS.IMPV.ACT*] the Soma for Indra to drink [*pátave:PRS.INF*]!

The general impression is that the hymn itself, while treating the soma-pressing through a mortar, sounds even rhythmically like the iterative act of pressing, thanks to repetition of pāda c-d in verses 1–4 and various other sound features giving the idea of a drum-like repetition and other erotic allusions (Rossi 2019, 120–121).

### 3.1.1 Pressing as Life-Giving

At first glance, OIA  $\sqrt{s\check{u}}$  forms<sup>4</sup> in RV 1.28 mainly concern the concept of [PRESSING], thus they seem to derive from  $\sqrt{sav}$  ‘to press, squeeze’: the Soma is a pressed juice (verse 6d *sunú sómam* ‘press (you) the Soma!’) and pestles press things in mortars (verse 1b *sótu-* (N) ‘pressing’ and verse 1c *ulúkhala-suta-* (Adj) ‘mortar-pressed’).

In particular, noun *sótu-*, appearing only two times in the Vedas (*WRV*, 1578, once at DAT.SG and once at ACC.SG), is a *\*tu-* derivative from  $\sqrt{sav}$  (PIE transposition *\*séu-tu-*) whose suffix generally points to the *nomen actionis*, thus ‘the act of pressing’. In RV 1.28.1b, *sótav-e* (*hapax*) is formally a DAT.SG from *sótu-*, but it is used as for the infinitive ‘to press’ within a linguistic anthropological process, after the formal similarity with infinitives ending in *-ave* and maybe the correspondence with *pátave* (PRS.INF) in pāda 6c. Folk-etymology shows its strength after the fact that later, in the hymn of pregnancy, RV 10.184.3c *sútave* (*hapax*) is an analogical PRS.INF from  $\sqrt{sav}_1$  ‘to generate, give birth’, likely based on *sótave*, because for PRS.INF *sútave* it is impossible a derivation from PPP *sūtá-*.

Such an analogical formation can be explained assuming that RV 1.28.1b *sótave* could have a connection with OIA  $\sqrt{sav}_1$  ‘to generate, give birth’, of course within folk-etymology. Thus, I translate the DAT.SG (~ PRS.INF) *sótave* as ‘for the pressing’ in line with the traditional interpretations of Griffith “to press ... out”, Geldner “zum Ausschlagen” and Jamison and Breton “in order to press”. However, I intend also a possible allusion to the [(PRO)CREATION].

In fact, in Vedic ritual semen is the essence of life, through which the creation is possible, with a ritual of pouring the semen into a hole to the left of the officer, which represents Agni’s womb (Gonda 1972, 9) and, in present-day Hindu worship, a similar representation involves Agni drinking Śiva’s semen from his phallus (Daniélou 1996, 27; Grether 2007, 22). The same concept of the masculine power as the creative principle appears as an onomastic and poetic motif in Old Irish, as demonstrated by García Ramón (2006, 88–89), concerning the Irish hero of great sexual potency, Fergus mac Róich, and the “pouring” idea (*Fer-gus* from PIE *\*b<sup>h</sup>er-* + *\*ǵ<sup>h</sup>eu-*) of the semen.

The cognitive metaphor of [PRESSING as PROCREATION] finds its explanation within the male side of the sexual act, that is also relevant from an anthropological viewpoint. Just as a sound association, in Old Indo-Aryan the similarity between *sunú-* (N) ‘child’ from  $\sqrt{sav}_1$  and imperative *sunú* ‘press!’ from  $\sqrt{sav}$  in verse 6d can be noted.

<sup>4</sup> Such a traditional Indic script  $\sqrt{s\check{u}}$  here stands for the collection of the three OIA roots ( $\sqrt{sav}$  ‘to press, squeeze’,  $\sqrt{sav}_1$  ‘to generate, give birth’ and  $\sqrt{sav}_2$  ‘to enliven, to impel’), that are liable to being folk-etymologized.

### 3.1.2 Other Male Sexual Allusions

In the verses presented above, there are further allusions to male sexuality and genitals. In pāda 1, *ūrdhvā-* (Adj) ‘straight, erect’ makes an indirect allusion to the penis, because in Vedic times it refers to the creative power of the gods, and the word is synchronically related to  $\sqrt{vardh}$  ‘to grow, strengthen’ in the Vedas (Lazzeroni 1997, 156–157). Then, it appears in classical Sanskrit *ūrdhva-lingin-*, epithet of Śiva as ‘ithyphallic’ (MBh), while the *śiva-linga-* is the ‘(erected) penis of Śiva’ still worshipped by the Hindus (Daniélou 1996, 23–24). Furthermore, verbal form *jalgulas* (from  $\sqrt{gar}$ <sub>2</sub> ‘to swallow’) can have a double folk-linguistic feature: the repetitive gulping can refer to rhythm of ejaculation (Schlerath 2002, 100–102) and, from a poetic point of view, it can be seen the echoic association between *jalgulah* and the word *gula-* ‘glans penis’ (see Clayton [2022, 52], who explains the vowel /u/ in *jalgulas* through sound analogy with *ulúkhala-* in the verse).

In pāda 6, noun *ágra-* ‘foremost part, tip, summit’ can allusively recall the penis, even after the plausible echo of *gula-* ‘tip of the penis’. Moreover, the recipient of the verse is addressed as *vānaspāti-* that is generally interpreted as the ‘Lord of the Wood’ with various different readings such as the pestle, as for RV 1.28 (see *WRV*, 1208 for the still accepted interpretations), and etymology wise it seems a compound of *vānas* wood:GEN.SG (from *vān-*) + *pāti-* ‘lord’.

I personally find plausible a folk-etymological interpretation of the epithet *vānaspāti-* as the ‘Lord of Love’, after OIA *vānas-* ‘love(liness), desire’ (cognate to Lat. *uenus* ‘charm, sex, love’). As for OIA  $\sqrt{van}$  ‘to love, desire’ (*EWAlia* 2: 499–500), Saul Migron (1980, 273) has proposed a semantic change in PIE [CHASE] (compare Lat. *uenor* ‘to hunt’) → [DESIRE], thus the final erotic meaning traces back to the hunting activity, typical of men<sup>5</sup>.

### 3.2 Left and Male Sexuality

To sum this Old Indo-Aryan section up, there are, unfortunately, no direct connections between “left” (OIA *savyá-*) and male sexuality and genitals, apart from the Vedic ritual as described by Jan Gonda (1972, 9), mentioned in §3.1.1 above. Thus, I showed how in Vedic times there was an overlap of meanings of the three  $\sqrt{sū}$  forms, that allow a variety of interpretations and readings tracing back to a sexual idea. In particular, OIA  $\sqrt{sav}$  ‘to press’ has a male-relating sexual meaning and the same root possibly occurs in the etymology of “left”-type I. However, more in-depth research in the phraseologies from all the languages attesting the *savyá-*-type must be explored.

<sup>5</sup> Such a semantic mutation keeps traces in Old Indo-Aryan from the early Vedic to Brāhmaṇa times (see Mucciarelli [2014, 7–9], for a study survey and *passim* for a collection of samples with commentary). I thank one of the anonymous reviewers to fostering my suggestion with this reference.

#### 4. Latin: Left-Type II, Phallus and Club

Ancient Rome witnesses the clearest features linking the “left”-words to the concept of masculinity and male genitals, not only in lexicon and poetic phraseology, but also in material culture and every-day speech and humor.

As shown in Table 1, in Latin there are both “left”-types II (*scaeuus*) and III (*laeuus*). These appeared even in the earlier stages of literature, since they are attested in Plautus (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE) and in Ennius (3<sup>rd</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE) respectively. Type II appears as the ‘typical’ Latin form, in fact the same base or stem creates some words with different semantic features concerning both concepts of [LEFT] and [MANHOOD]. This had been already investigated by the antiquarian Varro (2<sup>nd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) in the following passage:

Varro: *De lingua Latina* 7.96–97 [de Melo]

(96) In Matus (there is written): “the interpreter is an authority concerning a foul and sinister omen [*obscaeni ... funestique ominis*]. *Obscaenus* [foul, lewd] derives from *scaena* [stage, theatre]. Then, an indecent thing [*turpe*] is said *obscaenum*, because it must not be openly said apart from on stage [*scaenā*]. (97) Perhaps, (such etymology comes) from the fact that a certain indecent object [*turpicula res*] is hung on the necks of boys, to prevent harm from coming to them, and it is called *scaeuola* for a good omen. This derives from *scaeuia*, the left hand, because omens to the left are considered good ones. [...] This comes from Greek, because they call the ‘left hand’ *skaiá*; that is why, as I said, an indecent sign [*obscaenum omen*] is a bad sign [*omen turpe*].

In these chapters, Varro provides interesting information from the linguistic point of view. The connection between *obscaenus* (Adj) ‘lewd, foul’ and *scaena* (N) ‘stage, theatre’ (compare Gr. *skēnē*) is of course folk-etymological. However, linguistically and etymologically speaking, the connection between *obscaenus* (Adj) ‘lewd, foul’, *scaeuus* (N) ‘left’ and *scaeuola* (N) ‘phallic amulet’ can be valid.

##### 4.1 Playing with Affixation

Proto-Indo-European allows alternating word-formations with suffixes *\*-no-* and *\*-uó-*, such as in “right”-words, namely OIA *dákšina-* and Myc. /Deksi-wo-/ (see §1.3 above). Thus, *\*(ob-)scae-no-* (Adj) and *\*scae-uo-* (Adj) show the same formation with two possible alternating suffixes, basically having the same function of creating nominals. The meanings do not allow a common, inherited etymology, however linguistic anthropology can give again a path in this investigation.

In Plautus (*Stichus* 461 and *Asinaria* 266), there is the neologism *obscaeuō, -āre* ‘to constitute a (good/bad) omen’, which is a denominative from *ob* ‘against, opposed to’ + *scaeuia* ‘left hand’ with the folk-linguistic sense of ‘good omen’ as in Varro (*LL* 7.97), presented above. Again, word taboo shows its power: in *scaeuus*, the negative concept [LEFT] has become [GOOD] while in *obscaenus*, the evil force of [LEFT] has been negativized, thus vanquished, through the oppositive prefix *ob*. This euphemistic process of antiphrasis, which



consist of turning a tabooed referent into its opposite (Cardona 1985, 126), made the original meaning of the root disappear.

Nevertheless, Varro gives the additional item of *scaeuola* ‘phallic amulet’. Roman archaeology and ruins yield plenty of such pendants and various other phallic images with apotropaic power. These were often found on military or other buildings generally frequented by men, such as Pompeii brothels (Parker 2021 and previous literature). From a formal linguistic point of view, Latin *scaeuola* is a derivative from *scaeuus* (Adj) ‘left’ or *scaeuia* (N) ‘left hand’ with a hypocoristic and feminized suffix *-ōla*.

Diminutives are a common linguistic feature, through which speakers mark the absence of positiveness: cognitive sciences show that physical properties, such as sizes, influence the mental representations even as reflected within language form and use (Parzuchowski, Bocian, Gygax 2016, 2–3). Linguistically, such mental representation is still alive in everyday speech of present-day Italian, just as examples, *regal-one* (gift-AUG) represents both a ‘(physically) big gift’ and an ‘important or expensive gift’, while *regal-ino* (gift-DIM) on the contrary describes both a ‘(physically) small gift’ and a ‘gift of little significance’ or a ‘cheap gift’.

Linguistic feminization is also a kind of hypocorism (for a typological point of view, see Makri-Tsilipakou [2003, 718–719] regarding Modern Greek). Diminutivization and feminization are the linguistic anthropological processes which occurred in Latin *scaeuola* ‘phallic amulet’, in order to hide the original meaning of ‘phallus’<sup>6</sup>. The image of phallus is recognizable on the basis of the material amulet itself. Thus, Latin *scaeu-ol-a* might be morphologically described as ‘phallus-DIM-FMNZ’, revealing the euphemistic process concerning male genitals after the association made by Varro (*LL* 7.97) between the obscenity, *turpis* (Adj) ‘indecent, vulgar’ and *turpicula res* (NP) ‘indecent-DIM object (= phallus pendent)’ (for the theory of euphemism, see Crespo-Fernández [2015, 59–61, 143–144]).

#### 4.2 The Phallic Farce of Plautus

Plautus’ *Casina*, with its plot of a comedy of errors, ends in what has been named the “farsa fallica” (phallic farce) by Cesare Questa (1999, 81)<sup>7</sup>. The final scenes reveal the deception and trick played on the Senex (Old Man) who attempted to commit adultery with a young female slave (*Casina*) newly married to his own most loyal slave (*Olimpio*). The girl, however, was substituted with another male slave (*Calinus*, *seruus callidus*, the trickster character) dressed up as a bride. Scenes 21–23 consist of the acme of the comic sketch, when first

<sup>6</sup> Although the interpretation of “small phallus” is not sufficiently grounded on linguistic data, the cultural and pragmatic features discussed by Deroy (1976) for the etymology of the *cognomen* of Lucius Mucius *Scaeuola* can leave the discussion open. For a different and traditional position, although without argumentation, see de Melo (2019, 2: 1016).

<sup>7</sup> Text and casting of Plautus’ *Casina* are here those established by Cesare Questa (1999; 2001a). Loeb edition made in 2011 by de Melo keeps old positions dating back to the 1930s Ernout’s edition for *Les Belles Lettres*, no more enough grounded on philologic and performative evidence, such as the name spelling according to the classical first-century (BCE–CE) orthography and the division in acts, which is a Renaissance innovation (Questa 2001b, 70–73).

Olimpio and then the Senex rush out on stage after being hardly beaten with a club by the supposed bride-to-be.

As far as “left”-words are concerned, scenery of the *Casina* gives important information regarding stage directions to explain the connection between [LEFT] and [PHALLUS] ~ [MANHOOD]. From the audience’s perspective, on the left there is the door of the house of the Senex and his wife Cleostrata, along with an exit path to the countryside (Olimpio’s house). On the right, there is the door of Alcesimus and Murrina’s house (friends of the previous couple) and the exit path to the city center (forum).

The comedy of errors carries out with a trick and a counter-trick. First, the Senex arranges the marriage between Casina and Olimpio and obtains from Alcesimus the permission to use his house (on the right) as bridal chamber, where the Senex himself will wait for the bride. However, Cleostrata and Murrina discover the plan, pretend to follow the Senex’s plan by remaining in Cleostrata’s house (on the left), but they substitute the bride with Calinus as a counter-trick. Now I present a passage from scene 23, when Calinus, holding a club, comes on stage from Alcesimus and Murrina’s house on the right:

Plautus: *Casina* 963–973 [Questa]

CALINUS: Where are you, who wants to practice the customs of Marseille? Now, if you want to masturbate [*subigitare*] me, this is a good moment. Come back, please, to the bedroom: damn, you’ll die (coming) [*periisti*]! Come on, come here now! I will enter, for this fair judge [*aequom arbitrum*] (is) out of the courthouse.

SENEX: I’m dead (I’ve come) [*perii*]! That person there will fleece my ass [*defloccabit ... lumbos meos*] with the club. Over this way [*hāc* = to the left] there is the path I have to take, over that one [*illāc* = to the right] in the opposite (direction) there is my ass-wrecking [*lumbifragium*].

CLEOSTRATA: My kindest respects, O womanizer!

SENEX: There, my wife is opposite me: now I am between a rock and a hard place and I don’t know how to escape. This way [*hāc*] there are wolves, this way [*hāc*] dogs: the left-hand of the wolf [*lupina scaeva*] proceeds with a club. O crap, I think I will reverse [*permutabo*] that old saying: I go this way [*hāc*], I hope that the left-hand of the dog [*canina scaeva*] is better!

#### 4.2.1 Innuendo

In Plautus’ theatre, the comedic acme is often reached at the peak of vulgarity. The beginning of scene 23 as presented creates hilarity playing with male homosexual intercourse (line 963 *mores Massalienses* ‘the customs of Marseille’) and is further strengthened by the presence of an old man (the Senex). The lexicon used by Calinus allows both a literal interpretation and a sexual allusion.

Calinus refers to male masturbation and ejaculation (lines 964 *subigitō* ‘to masturbate:TRANS’, 965 and 967 *perēō* ‘to die’, see Adams 1982, 156, 159), to anal sexual acts (lines 967 *defloccō lumbos* ‘to fleece rear’ and 968 *lumbifragium* ‘ass-wrecking’, compare Adams [1982, 48]) and metaphorically to the visibly erected penis (line 966 *aequom arbitrum extra considium* ‘the fair judge out of the courthouse’).

Then, the slave holds a club (lines 967 and 971 *fustis*) to literally “kill” (*pereō* and, for a legal punishment interpretation by which I find myself unpersuaded, see Philippides [2015, 250–252]), thereby increasing the comicality after the wordplay association between [PHALLUS] and [CLUB, STICK]. Such an association is alive as much in Latin as in present-day southern Italian dialects, for example Sicilian *marruggiu* is the ‘shepherd / hiking stick’, but also a vulgar word for ‘penis’ or both *mazza* ‘club’ and *asu* ‘i mazzi’ ‘ace of clubs (playing cards)’ are frequent Sicilian euphemisms referring to [PHALLUS]. The same euphemism occurs in Armenian, as *varoc* ‘stick, rod’ → *varoc* *arn* (stick + man:GEN.SG) ‘penis’ (see Martirosyan 2024: §3.3.5).

Finally, in line 972 verb *permūtō* ‘to reverse, change completely’ marks the end of the comic sketch: the Senex “reverses” the situation and reaches his wife Cleostrata, who in the end forgives him (Questa 1999, 100–101).

#### 4.2.2 Deixis as Stage Direction

In theatre and the performing arts, the acting space must be carefully delineated and used in order to make the audience understand the relationships between actors themselves and the imaginary space off stage. For these reasons, dramatists make a meticulous use of deixis and in general words which can be considered a kind of stage direction, although not complete detailed handbooks for the staging (Taplin 1977a, 28–29; 1977b).

As far as *Casina*’s scene 23 is concerned, implicit words are some deictic adverbs of place (*hāc* ‘by this way’ and *illāc* ‘by that way’), which when taken together with the scenery can shed light on the moves of actors<sup>8</sup>. The Senex went just out of Alcesimus and Murrina’s house on the right while Cleostrata is about to reach him from her home on the left (scene 22) and scene 23 opens with Calinus rushing out from the house on the right. Thus, Cleostrata is upstage left, Calinus upstage right and the Senex is likely to stay center stage attempting to find an escape. In fact, he says that on the left side, the closer to him (line 968 *hāc* ‘by this way’) there is Cleostrata (*faciundum* ‘what has to be done’) and on the right side, the one further from him (*illāc* ‘by that way’) there is Calinus (*lumbifragium* ‘ass-wrecking’).

The whole scene is of course dynamic and, theatrically, the actors move on stage generally toward their respective opposite sides in order to create room and make the other characters visible. Thus, Cleostrata stays likely upstage left, Calinus moves holding the club from upstage right to downstage left and the Senex to the right side. So all the characters are clearly visible to the audience: in fact, the Senex in line 971 now says *hāc lupī, hāc canes* ‘here the wolves, here the dogs’ because locative pronominal adverb *hāc* ‘by this way’ identifies for the audiences their left side of the scene.

A clue to this is that the characters are showing their left hands (lines 971 *scaeva ... gerit* ‘the left-hand holds’ and 973 *scaeva* ‘the left-hand’)<sup>9</sup>, because the staging requires that

<sup>8</sup> The use of spatial “right” and “left” refers in this section to the audience perspective.

<sup>9</sup> I am aware that this interpretation of *scaeva* as ‘left-hand’ in Plautus’ *Casina* 971 and 973 is solely mine, while the rest of the literature interprets it as ‘omen’, the most recent study is that of Maurizio Bettini (2018, 109–110). The parallel with Horace (*Sermones* 2.2.64) explains only the presence of “dogs” and “wolves” for expressing the hard choice or situation (Houghton 2004). However, I find myself unpersuaded and, content

characters are visible to spectators. Cleostrata and Calinus should likely open their chests towards the audience, thus they must hold masks with their right hands and use the left ones to beat or to use the tools, so that they remain visible.

### 4.3 Left and Masculinity

To summarize this Latin section, Ancient Rome witnesses the most evident features connecting PIE “left” word and concept to masculinity and the phallus, in particular. From a lexical point of view, both “left”-types II and III are attested in Latin, but the *skaiós*-type, namely *scaeuus*, seems to be the original Latin one. The cultural use of *scaeuus* (Adj) ‘left’ and its derivatives have been variously tabooed and folk-etymologized through the ‘tools’ analyzed by linguistic anthropology as dimitivization and feminization (*scaeu-ola*), antiphrasis (*scaeuia* ‘good omen’), mutation of the word with further affixes (*ob-scaenus*), as in §4.1 above.

However, the connection between [LEFT] and [MANHOOD] is also evident in material culture and iconography concerning the phallic amulet (*scaeuola*) and in popular comedy by Plautus. The comic acme aims at amusing the audience while exhibiting some features, which denote a connection between [LEFT] and [PHALLUS], and mark masculinity.

### 5. Greek: Left-Type III, Jargons and Homosexuality

It has been established that in the Hellenic world the “left”-taboo is stronger than in other branches (see §2.3 above). The presence of *skaiós* (Adj) ‘left’ in the Homeric epics remains in the present paper an open issue, because as far as I know there are no taboo features in the available limited data. In Greek, the power of the “left”-taboo allowed an early change of words and relegation to a restricted semantic field or a specialized jargon (see §2.2.3 above). Such semantic relegation favours the minimal presence of mutation in some forms and the preservation of some relic forms<sup>10</sup>.

#### 5.1 Tabooing between Lexicological and Technical Texts

The starting point of the investigation of the word taboo in the *laiós*-type consists of two glosses from Hesychius of Alexandria (5<sup>th</sup> century CE) and Photius of Constantinople (9<sup>th</sup> century CE), late antique and Byzantine important lexica. The glosses belong to the language of Old Comedy (5<sup>th</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century BCE), maybe Cephisodorus Comic (*PCG* 8: 379):

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and logic wise, I cannot come up with a convincing explanation for the presence of “omen” in this passage consisting of the comic peak with so much dynamic and naturalistic stage action (compare Bartolotta [2021, 89], who adopts a cognitive linguistic spatial methodology, but does not include the adjective *scaeuus*). For these reasons, I prefer to propose this staging and theatrical explanation, which fits into the broader linguistic anthropological approach carried out in the present paper.

<sup>10</sup> See Muscianisi: “Greek *λαιός* ‘Left’, Glosses (*λαι*)*λαί* and Other Cognate Forms: A Study in Proto-Indo-European Morphology, Semantics and Reconstruction”, research in preparation.

Hesychius λ 111 [Cunningham]

*lai*: within obscene acts [*aiskhrourgía* = homosexual intercourse].

Photius λ 28 [Theodoridis]

*lailai*: concerning emasculation [*apokopé*] within obscene language [*aiskbrología*].

Hesychius and Photius witness two adverbs or adverb phrases, the latter of which (*lailai*) seems an inflected iterative compound (āmreḡita). These compounds are generally used to express repetitiveness from ancient Greek to the modern times (Andriotis 1956; Manolessou, Tsolakidis 2009, 33–34) and even inflected, as in Cypr. *a-ma-ti-a-ma-ti* /āmati\_āmati/ DAT.SG ‘every day, day by day’ and in second-millennium-BCE Myc. *we-te-i-we-te-i* /wete<sup>hi</sup>\_wete<sup>hi</sup>/ DAT/LOC.SG ‘every year, yearly’ and *a-mo-ra-ma* /āmōr\_āmar/ ACC.SG ‘day by day’ (Meißner, Tribulato 2001, 316)<sup>11</sup>.

From a semantic point of view, the two glosses fall within the vulgar language (*aiskbrología* in Photius) and concern male sexuality. As for the latter, in philosophical and medical texts and later in a Christianized context, Gr. *aiskhrourgía* (< \**aisk<sup>h</sup>ro-uerg-*) refers to the ‘obscene acts’. Such definitions can be found in the scripts of the philosopher Sextus Empiricus and in those of the philosopher and medical doctor Galen, both pagan from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE:

Sextus Empiricus: *Pyrrhoniae hypotyposes* 3.199; 206 [Mutschmann]

(199) For example, among us, male homosexual intercourse [*arrhenomixía*] is (considered) obscene [*aiskhrós*], or rather it is considered illegal; however, it is not obscene among the Germanoi [Iranian tribe?], but quite common, as it is said. [...]

(206) Even masturbation [*tò aiskhrourgeîn*], which for us is indecent, Zeno [of Kition, stoic, 4<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE] does not condemn; and we are informed that other peoples practice those bad things as good ones.

Galenus 12.249.9–12 [Kuhn]

It is a quite grievous shame for a wise man if people call him coprophagist or homosexual man [*aiskhrourgós*] or male prostitute [*kínaidos*], but more than the homosexuals [*aiskhrourgós*] we condemn the male perverts (among those) who practice oral sex.

As shown in the previous passages, the semantics of such *aiskbro*-words in Greek is quite specialized towards male sexuality, in particular Gr. *aiskhrourgós* (N) is the \*‘obscene agent’ → ‘homosexual man’, and *aiskhrourgeō* (V) means \*‘to perform obscenity’ → ‘to mastur-

<sup>11</sup> All the manuscripts of Photius’ lexicon attest the lemma as *λαιλαι* (without diacritics) or *λα̅ιλαι* (with incoherent accentuation), but modern scholars preferred to delete the first part {*λαι*}*λαι* after Hesychius, until the most recent edition by Theodoridis in 1998. However, the modern editorial deletion is here not accepted. As for the placement of accent, it can equally be either *λαιλαι* as an actual compound (compare OIA *divé-dive* LOC.SG ‘day by day’) or *λαιλαι* as an interjection (compare Gr. *παπαι*, *βαβαι*, etc.). Because in Greek there is no grammatical perception of *āmreḡita*-phrases but just a pragmatic linguistic conception (Matras 1998, 307–309), I prefer here an accentuation closer to the performing and comic use of this gloss.

bate:REFL' and it concerns male masturbation in the frame of sex between men (*arrhenomixia*). Thus, it is noteworthy that Hesychius and Photius use these specific *aiskhro*-words to delineate the meaning of glosses *laí* and *lailaí*, because they connect the two glosses to the cultural environment of male sexuality and the resulting taboo.

## 5.2 Left and Manhood

To sum up the findings of this Hellenic section, in Greek culture the “left”-taboo was “lived” – in Tambiah’s words, see §1.1 above – with particular intensity. This is particularly evident, because speakers relegated some taboo words to a technical language or semantic field, favouring the presence of relic forms just for specific poetic diction or jargon.

The two glosses, Hesychius λ 111 *laí* and Photius λ 28 *lai-laí*, have in my view to be connected with Gr. *laíós* (Adj) ‘left’ (see note 10 above). In fact, *laí* consists of a relic locative that can be the base stem for PGr. \**laí-i-uó-*. Morphology wise, this describes the word “left” as a delocalival derivation on an inherited hysterodynamic *s*-stem locative, namely PIE \**lh<sub>2</sub>-és-i/-Ø* (\**CC-éC-i/-Ø*). On the layer of meaning, the two lexicographic words fit into the semantic field concerning what in present time is called homosexuality. It must, then, be considered the extended conception among the Greeks of broader relationships between men throughout the activities and the phases of their lives (Dover 1989, 144). Even the semanticizing of ‘shield’ from [LEFT] belongs to the sphere of manhood, since war is the peculiar and main activity of men, thus in the hoplite culture of the ancient Greeks left-hands hold shields to protect the side of the body containing the heart.

From an anthropological point of view, the lexical specialization of these glosses, mostly within a context of male sexual practices and behaviors, strengthens the connotation of Gr. *laí* (Adv) and *lailaí* (Adv), thus probably the concept of [LEFT], within [SEX(UALITY)] and [MANHOOD] even in the frame of linguistics.

## 6. Conclusions and Open Issues

The end of this paper leaves some unresolved issues open to further research. This article has dealt with a study in cultural and linguistic anthropology of the word taboo, then applying theory on the case study of PIE concept of “left”.

As for the linguistic interdiction, I have shown that all PIE “left” words and types concern the concept of [MANHOOD] in general, cognitively and culturally metaphorized into masculinity, male genitalia and male homosexual intercourse. This meaning appears next to the traditional one concerning [DEFECATION, EXCREMENT], attested in Brahmanic tradition. Although a deeper investigation in the other Indo-European branches attesting the different “left”-words is needed, I selected for this paper the clearest and ‘original’ attestations of each PIE “left”-type (Table 1). Thanks to poetic discourse analysis, traces of such a taboo can be found with various grades of intensity and clarity in Old Indo-Aryan (*savyá-*, type I) as the male power of procreation with the metaphor of pressing, the rhythm of ejaculation and the cult of the phallus, in Latin (*scaevus*, type II) with a linguistically and archaeologically clear and direct connection with the phallus, as the organ which mostly

characterizes masculinity, and in Greek (*laiós*, type III) with a number of hints and sources concerning male homosexuality and male sexual practices.

As for the linguistic reconstruction, I reserve it for a different, dedicated article (in preparation), but I think that the pair of Greek lexicological items belonging to the language of Old Comedy, namely the adverbs *lai* (Hesychius λ 111) and reduplicated *lai-lai* (Photius λ 28), can be recognized as the linguistic base(s) for Gr. *laiós* (Adj) ‘left’.

### Abbreviations

Cypr. = Cypriot Syllabic	OCS = Old Church Slavonic
Enn. = Ennius (author)	OIA = Old Indo-Aryan
Hom. = Homeric poems	PCelt. = Proto-Celtic
Lat. = Latin	PGr. = Proto-Greek
<i>LL</i> = <i>De lingua Latina</i>	PIE = Proto-Indo-European
Goth. = Gothic	Plaut. = Plautus (author)
Gr. = Greek	RV = <i>R̥gveda</i>
KB = <i>Kauṣītaki-brāhmana</i>	ŚBr = <i>Śatapatha-brāhmana</i>
MBh = <i>Mahābhārata</i>	s.v. = sub voce
MIr. = Middle Irish	ToB = Tocharian B
MW = Middle Welsh	Tyrt. = Tyrtaeus (author)
Myc. = Mycenaean (Greek)	YAv. = Young Avestan

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