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Etymology of the words *network*, *net*, and *work*

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network

This word is rather strange - what exactly is a network? Obviously, a work or construction reminiscent of a net, but when was the word first used in this form? Although the two component words are from common Germanic stock, the juxtaposition *network* seems to be a uniquely English coinage, later imitated by the Germans with *Netzwerk*. However, we must not forget the well-known Latin term *opus reticulatum*, a type of brickwork with the bricks placed at $\pi/4$ to the horizontal, so that the pattern of mortar lines resembles a net. Since this term means literally 'net work', perhaps it is the prototype of the English word? The earliest occurrence in print of English *network* is in the Geneva bible of 1560 (the 1599 edition seems to have changed the spelling to *network*):

And thou shalt make unto it a grate like networke of brass (Exodus xxvii 4).

Spenser wrote in his poem *Muiopotmos* (1590):

*Not anie damzell, which her vaunteth most
In skilfull knitting of soft silken twyne;
Nor anie skil'd in workmanship embost;
Nor anie skil'd in loupes of fingring fine,
Might in their diuers cunning euer dare,
With this so curious networke to compare.*

According to the OED, the word is recorded in 1658 referring to reticulate structures in animals and plants. From 1839 it is used to refer to rivers and canals, and from 1869 to railways. In 1883 a distribution network of electrical cables is first referred to, and in 1914 a wireless broadcasting network.

What about the two component words? *Net* is the more interesting word.

net

This word is first recorded in English in the writings of King Ælfréd, in his translation of Boethius from about the year 888. It was also used in Old English for a spider's web. Here are the complete *nett* and *nette* entries from the Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary. Note that some of the æ characters should have macrons, but these cannot be represented in html, so I just left them off. The additions [in blue] are my own attempts at translation.

nett, es; *n*.

I. *a net* (for fowling, fishing, or hunting) :--

Net *rete*. Wrt. Voc. i. 285, 16. Nyt, 73, 41.

Ned *cassis*, [net,web,trap] ii. 14, 3. Hyra net wæs tóbrocen [their net was broken], Lk. Skt. 5, 6. Úres fisceres nett *nostrī piscatoris rete*, [Our fish-net] Ælfc. Gr. 15; Som. 19, 57. Feallaþ on nette his *cadent in retiaculo ejus*, [falling in his net] Ps. Spl. 140, II. Ic mín nett út læte *laxabo rete*, [I shall let out my net] Lk. Skt. 5, 5; Mt. Kmb. 4, 18. Lætþ ðæt nett on ða swiðran healfe. [release the net on the right side] Jn. Skt. 21, 6. Ic bréde nett *plecto*, [I plait] Ælfc. Gr. 28; Som. 32, 8. Óþ ðæt ðe hig (wildeór) *cuman tó ðám nettan* ... Ne canst ðú huntian búton mid nettum? Coll. Monast. Th. 21, 15-21: 22, II. On feala wísan ic beswíce fugelas, hwilon mid nettum, 25, II. Hí forléton hyra nett (netta, Lind.) [they were preparing their nets] *relictis retibus*, Mt. Kmb. 4, 22: Homl. Th. i. 578, 21.

II. *a mosquito-net*:--Nette, fleógryfte *conopio*, Wrt. Voc. ii. 19, 18.

III. *net-work, web*: -- Swá tedre swá swá gangewifran nett, Ps. Th. 38, 12. Donne hió (*the spider*) geornast biþ ðæt beo áfære fleógan on nette [that she may frighten flies into her net], 89, 10. Folc

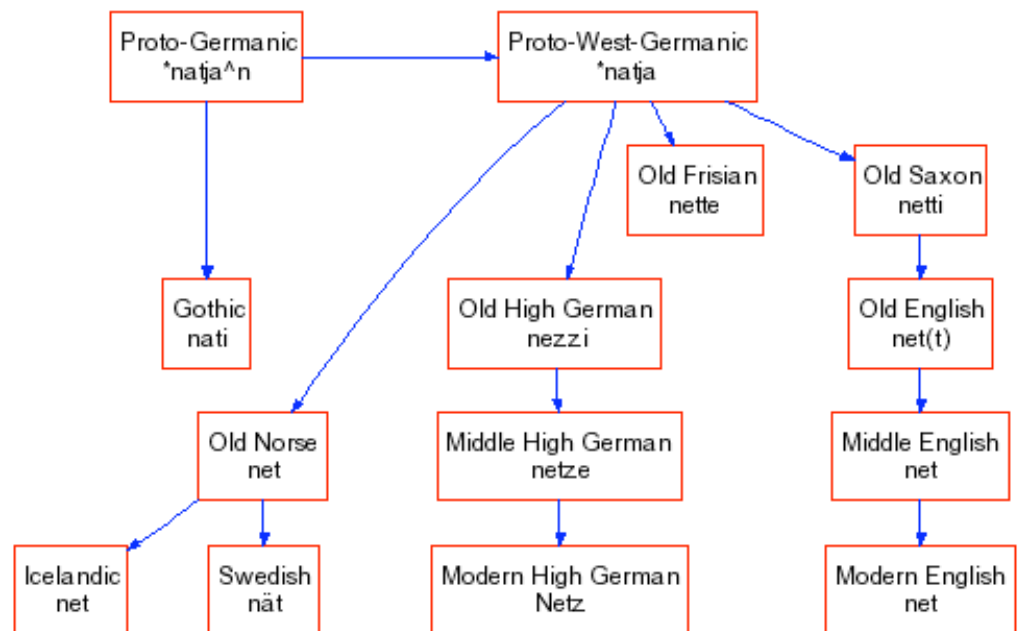
gescylde hálgan nette (*with a net-work of clouds*), Cd. Th. 182, li; Exod. 74. [Goth, nati: O. Sax. netti, (fisk-)net: O. Frs. nette: Icel. net; gen. pl. netja : O. H. Ger. nezzi rete.] v. æl-, boge-, breóst-, deór-, drag-, feng-, fisc-, fleóh-, here-, bring-, inwit-, mycg-, searo-, wæl-nett, and next word.

nette, an;

f. *The net-like caul* :-- Nette (*under the heading de membris hominum*) *disceptum* i. *reticulum* (cf. hoc reticulum, pinguedo circa jecur [fat around liver], 704, 7), Wülck. Gl. 293,6. Nette *oligia*, 35, 34. Nytte *obligia* [binding, bandage], Wrt. Voc. i. 45, 18. Nette, ii. 63, 39 : *disceptum*, 26,19. [Icel. netja the caul: cf. O. H. Ger. nezzi adeps [fat] intestini; pl. intestina.] v. neta.

Net has many cognates in Germanic languages and a probable one in Latin. The Germanic words are of neuter gender (except for *nót* which is feminine); the Latin word is feminine. Note that the normal Latin word for a net is *rete*, although there may have also been a Vulgar Latin word **tragina* for a dragnet.

language	word
Gothic	nati
Old English	net(t), netti
Middle English	net
Modern English	net
Modern Dutch	net
Old High German	nezzi
Middle High German	netze
Modern High German	Netz
Old Frisian	nette
Old Saxon	netti
Old Norse	net (netja v.), nót
Modern Icelandic	net
Modern Swedish	nät
Latin	nassa



The network of Germanic 'net' words

The Gothic word occurs exactly seven times in the bible. It takes the form *natja* in the dative. Because Gothic is the earliest record of Germanic (from about 350), it is worth looking at all these occurrences:

Marcus 1, 16: *Jah hvarbonds faur marein Galeilias gasahv Seimonu jah Andraian broþar is, þis Seimonis, vairpandans nati in marein; vesun auk fiskjans. [And going to the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net in the sea; they were also fishermen.]*

Marcus 1, 18: *Jah suns afletandans þo natja seina laistdidedun afar imma. [And soon they left their net and followed him.]*

Marcus 1, 19: *Jah jainþro inn gaggands framis leitul gasahv lakobu þana Zaibaidaias jah Iohanne broþar is, jah þans in skipa manvjandans natja. [And going on a little, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in their ship mending nets.]*

Lucas 5, 2: *jah gasahv tva skipa standandona at þamma saiva, iþ fiskjans afgaggandans af im usþvohun natja. [and he saw two ships at the lake; but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their net.]*

Lucas 5, 4: *Bipeh þan ganapida roðjands, qap du Seimonau: brigg ana diupipa jah athahid þo natja izvara du fiskon. [When he had spoken, he said to Simon, "go to the deep and release the net for fishing."]*

Lucas 5, 5: *Jah andhafjands Seimon qap du imma: talzjand, alla naht þairharbaidjandans vaiht ni nemum: iþ afar vaurda þeinamma vairpam natja. [And Simon said to him, "We worked all night for nothing: but at your word I will throw down the net."]*

Lucas 5, 6: *Jah þata taujandans galukan managein fiske filu, sve natja dishnupnodedun ize. [And when they had done this they had many fish, as their net was breaking.]*

The Latin word meant a creel or wicker fish-basket. It was used by Pliny (in the ablative plural *nassis* 'with nets') in book 9 of his Natural History:

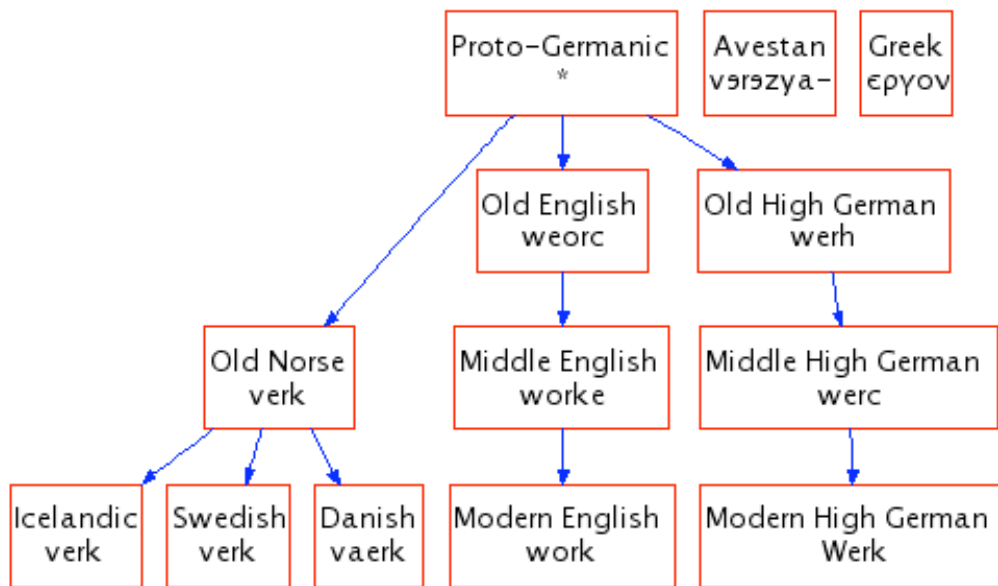
92: *mire omnibus marinis expetentibus odorem quoque eorum, qua de causa et nassis inlinuntur . [amazingly all marine creatures desire this smell, for which reason nets are smeared with it]*

132: *capiuntur autem purpuræ parvulis rarique textu veluti nassis in alto iactis. [purpurs [molluscs yielding purple dye] are caught with small delicate nets, thrown into the deep.]*

Nassa might be derived from a root *nad-*. Some people think that this might be related to the word *nodus*, a knot. Others relate it to the verb *necto*, 'I weave' (which seems to be not related to the German *nähen*, 'to sew').

work

The component *work* is another widespread Germanic word. It has a cognate in Greek *εργον*.



The network of 'work' words

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