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Rooted or Planted? The Power of Etymology in J. A. Comenius and Early Modern Culture of Knowledge

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Etymology is often regarded as a branch of linguistics that explores the historical origins of words by tracing their sound changes. However, in the early modern period, etymology was a strongly presentist concept deeply connected to knowledge. Scholars searched for the supposed original meanings to uncover hidden truths, recover ancient wisdom, and reaffirm divine revelation. In many fields of knowledge, the allegedly original semantics of words served to legitimise intellectual constructs and theoretical frameworks. Etymology was a specific “Denkform” (E. R. Curtius) in which language was not just a medium of communication but a source of inherent meaning shaped by divine will or natural order. In my paper, I will analyse how John Amos Comenius, a member of Samuel Hartlib’s correspondence network, employed etymology, distinguishing its functions as a tool of thinking, a means of legitimisation, and an instrument of scholarly self-fashioning. I will explore how etymology structured his conceptual framework, reinforced the authority of his definitions and how it functioned as a demonstration of his erudition, particularly his command of Greek.

Keywords

Early modern knowledge, etymology, Johann Amos Comenius, language

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Short Biography

Mgr. Lenka Řezníková, PhD is a research fellow at the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Institute of Philosophy.

She majored in history and classical philology at the University of Prague. At the same facility, she completed her doctoral thesis. In her research, she focuses on early modern and pre-modern intellectual history. Operating at the intersection between history, literary history and philosophy, she is particularly interested in the history of historical thinking, early modern epistemology, and the relations between textuality and thinking. She also participates in the edition of Comenius’s writings DJAK/Opera Omnia.

She is the author of a number of articles and several books related to the above topics. Recently, she published two books on early modern epistemology: *Ad majorem evidentiam: Literary Representations of the Obviousness in the Work of J. A. Comenius* (Prague 2018); and *Historiam videre. Testimony, Experience and Empirical Evidence in the Historiography of the Unity of Brethren 1600–1660* (Prague 2024), both in Czech. She was a principal researcher and a research team member in various projects in the Czech Republic and Germany. Currently, she participates in the ERC CZ project *The Origins of Modern Encyclopaedism (TOME): Launching Evolutionary Metaphorology*, which adopts computational approaches and distant reading techniques to explore the role of cognitive metaphors in the early modern encyclopaedism, and in the project *Manuscript Practices and the Textuality of Exile Communities from the Czech Lands in the 1620s and 1630s*, which studies the role of manuscript practices and manuscript circulation in the establishment of Bohemian and Moravian non-Catholic communities in exile centers in Central Europe in the 1620s–1630s. For further details and a bibliography, see <https://komeniologie.flu.cas.cz/...h-d>.

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