

Scanning speech and word history

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In the mid-1800s, Charcot used the term *scandés* in one of his lectures on diseases of the nervous system to describe a particular problem with speech frequently noted in patients with disseminated sclerosis:

“Une étude plus attentive fait reconnaître que les mots sont comme scandés: il y a une pause entre chaque syllabe, et celles-ci sont prononcées lentement.”¹

George Sigerson’s English translation published by the New Sydenham Society in 1877 runs as follows:

“A closer examination shows that the words are as if measured or scanned; there is a pause after every syllable, and the syllables themselves are pronounced slowly.”²

The meaning of the French “*scandés*” and the English “scanned” may be lost on English-speaking neurologists not familiar with the various usages of this word, which is now ubiquitous in neurology.

From the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language³ comes the following information that helps to clarify what Charcot meant:

WORD HISTORY: In the 1969 edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary* a dead issue was buried by our Usage Panel, 85% of whom thought it was acceptable to use *scan* in the sense “to look over quickly,” though the note stated that this was less formal usage. The usage issue was raised because *scan* in an earlier sense meant “to examine closely.” From a historical perspective it is easy to see how these two opposite senses of *scan* developed. The source of our word, Latin *scandere*, which meant “to climb,” came to mean “to scan a verse of poetry,” because one could beat the rhythm by lifting and putting down one’s foot. The Middle English verb *scannen*, derived from *scandere*, came into Middle English in this sense (first recorded in a text composed before

1398). In the 16th century this highly specialized sense having to do with the close analysis of verse developed other senses, such as “to criticize, examine minutely, interpret, perceive.” From these senses having to do with examination and perception, it was an easy step to the sense “to look at searchingly” (first recorded in 1798), perhaps harking back still to the careful detailed work involved in analyzing prosody. The sense of looking something over to find a specific set of things was eventually broadened to include looking over the surface of something, with or without close scrutiny of the details. From this was born the modern usage of *scan* as a verb meaning “look over quickly.”

Charcot used “*scandés*” as it applies to scanning poetry, an activity perhaps unknown to many neurologists nowadays. Continued use of this descriptive phrase, “scanning speech,” offers the opportunity to keep alive this history of a word whose meaning has evolved in ways unimaginable when Charcot used it in the mid-1800s.

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2. Charcot JM. Lectures on diseases of the nervous system. London: The New Sydenham Society, 1877;192.
3. American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th ed. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000:1554.

Correction

Clinical studies with transdermal rotigotine in early Parkinson’s disease

In the article “Clinical studies with transdermal rotigotine in early Parkinson’s disease” [*Neurology* 2005;65(Suppl 1):S11–S14] by Poewe and Luessi, the co-author’s last name was misspelled. The author’s name should be as follows:

F. Luessi, MD

The Publisher regrets this error.

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Clinical studies with transdermal rotigotine in early Parkinson's disease

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