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Cha·me·leon  (kə-mēl yən, -mē lē-ən)

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n.

Variant of [Chamaeleon](#).

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cha·me·leon  (kə-mēl yən, -mē lē-ən)

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n.

1. Any of various tropical lizards of the family Chamaeleonidae, chiefly of Africa and Madagascar, having a prehensile tail, eyes that can move independently, and the ability to change color.
2. An anole lizard, especially *Anolis carolinensis* of the southeast United States.
3. A changeable or inconstant person: "*In his testimony, the nominee came off as ... a chameleon of legal philosophy*" (Joseph A. Califano, Jr.)

[Middle English *camelioun*, from Latin *chamaeleōn*, from Greek *khamailēōn* : *khamai*, on the ground; see [dhghem-](#) [in the Appendix of Indo-European roots](#) + *leōn*, lion (translation of Akkadian *nēš qaqqari*, ground lion, lizard : Akkadian *nēšu*, lion + Akkadian *qaqqari*, genitive of *qaqqaru*, the earth, ground); see [LION](#).]

cha·me·le·on ic (-lē-ŏn ɪk) *adj.*

Word History: The words referring to the animal chameleon and the plant chamomile are related etymologically by a reference to the place one would expect to find them, that is, on the ground. The first part of both words goes back to the Greek form *khamai*, meaning "on the ground." What is found on the ground in each case is quite different, of course. The *khamailēōn* is a "lion (*leōn*) on the ground," a term translating the phrase *nēš qaqqari*, "chameleon" in Akkadian, the Semitic language spoken in ancient Mesopotamia. The *khamaimēlon* is "an apple (*mēlon*) on the ground," so named because the blossoms of at least one species of the plants called *chamomile* have an applelike scent. *Chameleon* and *chamomile* are also related etymologically to another earthly life form, one whose earthliness was contrasted with that of the gods. Greek *khamai* shares the same Indo-European root, **dhghem-*, "earth," as the Latin words *homō* and *hūmōnus*, the source of English *Homo sapiens* and *human*.



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chameleon

Parson's chameleon

Calumma parsonii

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Indo-European & Semitic Roots Appendices

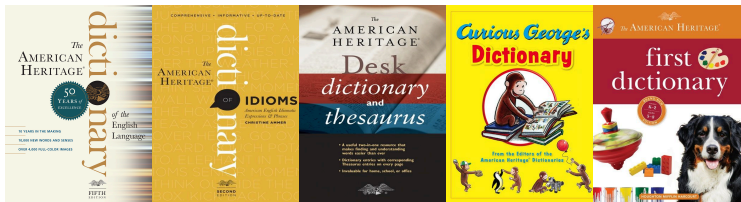
Thousands of entries in the dictionary include etymologies that trace their origins back to reconstructed proto-languages. You can obtain more information about these forms in our online appendices:

[Indo-European Roots](#)

[Semitic Roots](#)

The Indo-European appendix covers nearly half of the Indo-European roots that have left their mark on English words. A more complete treatment of Indo-European roots and the English words derived from them is available in our [Dictionary of Indo-European Roots](#).

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