

CORRESPONDENCE

*To the Editors of 'The Observatory'*

*Increasing Crescents*

As etymology is one of my hobbies, my interest was piqued when, in a recent book review<sup>1</sup>, Trimble pointed out that in some contexts it is necessary to specify that a crescent Moon refers to the waxing crescent. Originally, that would have been a tautology, as 'crescent' (cognate with 'increase' and the Italian 'crescendo' meaning increasingly louder music) means 'growing'. However, in modern English the term refers only to the shape. The corresponding French term, *croissant*, is also used to refer to the shape, be it that of the Moon or of a pastry, but also retains the meaning 'growing' or 'expanding', as cosmologists should know from the title of a famous paper<sup>2</sup> ('Un Univers homogène de masse constante et de rayon croissant rendant compte de la vitesse radiale des nébuleuses extra-galactiques') later translated into English<sup>3</sup> ('A homogeneous universe of constant mass and increasing radius accounting for the radial velocity of extra-galactic nebulae'). Of course, the illuminated area of the Moon as seen from Earth increases also during the second quarter, but as far as I know 'crescent' has been used to refer only to the first and last quarters; the fact that the illuminated area is decreasing during the last quarter shows the extent to which the meaning referring to shape has completely taken over. The terms 'waxing' and 'waning' refer to increase and decrease during both corresponding quarters in each case. 'Wax' is cognate with German 'wachsen', which is the normal word for 'grow' — though interestingly not used in reference to the phases of the Moon ('zunehmend' and 'abnehmend', the normal words for 'increasing' and 'decreasing', correspond to 'waxing' and 'waning', respectively) — but in modern English is used almost only with reference to the Moon or in a figurative sense (*e.g.*, 'to wax poetic'). A crescent Moon in German is referred to as a *Sichel* due to the similarity of the shape to an agricultural tool; the English cognate 'sickle' is sometimes used to refer to the crescent Moon.

Yours faithfully,  
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*References*

- (1) V. Trimble, *The Observatory*, **142**, 286, 2022.
- (2) G. Lemaître, *Ann. Sci. Soc. Brux.*, **47**, 49, 1927.
- (3) G. Lemaître, *MNRAS*, **91**, 483, 1931.