OF UNKNOWN [?] ORIGIN

ANDERS AHLQVIST

University College, Galway

The purpose of this little note is to remind Anglicists of the existence of a linguistic group that may have contributed somewhat more to the present make-up of the English language than is sometimes accepted by English scholars. The linguistic group in question is the Celtic one and the interaction between Celtic and English provides a seemly excuse for a professional Celticist to publish in a journal devoted to English studies.

In one of the most recent and useful dictionaries of English etymology, Hoad (1986) provides the two examples that I wish to discuss here. The first one is *jilt*, about which Hoad (1986 : 247b) has this to say:

> jilt †loose woman; woman who casts off a lover.
> XVII. 'A new canting word' in Blount's Glos-
> sographia' of 1674, of unkn. orig.; hence as vb.,
> the earliest recorded ex. of which (1660) shows
> a wider sense of 'deceive, cheat'.

The account of the history of this word is based on that found in *OED* (vol. V, 1933 : 583b), which also gives the verb separately, averring that a 'connexion ... is doubtful' between the two. However, Hoad is surely right in seeing noun and verb as belonging together.

On the other hand, I do not quite see why the verb has to be regarded as secondary. For one thing, its first attestation is somewhat earlier than that of the noun. Also, it seems to me obvious that it has a rather wider semantic range than the noun. Thus, it appears, at the very least, not entirely unreasonable, to suggest that the verb is the source of the noun, or, in other words, that the verb came into existence first, with wider meanings like both 'deceive, cheat' and (*OED*, loc. cit.) 'prove false to', 'cast off', the semantic core of which is clearly the notion of 'denying (a promies or impression already given)'.

As far as I am aware, no acceptable[1] etymology from English itself has ever been proposed for this. Thus it is probably quite reasonable to assume (given the magnitude of the labours of English etymologists over the years), that such an etymology is unlikely to be forthcoming. However, before resigning oneself, as Hoad (loc. cit.) does, to labelling it 'of unkn. orig.'; it seems not inappropriate to suggest that the languages spoken in places adjacent to England might be examined for possible sources, for items of this nature.

To my mind, it seems quite obvious that Lewy (1956 : 317; cf. 1966) had the correct idea in stating that: 'Das Wort ist — ich darf wohl sagen — offenbar ein Irisches Lehnwort: *diúltaim* »I deny, oppose, renounce, abandon ...; I jilt; »', giving references to Dinneen (1904 : 247a [cf. 1927 : 344b—345a]) and Vendryes (1908 : 70). In Old, Middle and Modern Irish, this word belongs to the core lexicon of the language. Its Indo-European etymology (Vendryes 1974 : S—138) is somewhat uncertain, but the occurence (cf. ibid.) in Welsh of the same root guarantees it a pedigree as a linguistic item inherited from Common Celtic. The standard[2] Modern Irish form *diúltaigh* (var: *diúlt*) and Scottish Gaelic *diùlt* derive from the Old Irish prototonic[3] form *díltai*[4], corresponding to deuterotonic[3] *do·sluindi*[4]. The precise phonetic value of palatalised *d* in Irish and Scottish Gaelic varies from one dialect to another (O'Rahilly 1932 : 203—204), but its similarity, everywhere, to the sound of English *j* is obvious. The long *-ú-* in the modern form of the word has its origin[5] in the glide between the long *í* of the Old Irish form and the following non-palatalised consonant cluster. In the Classical Modern Irish grammatical tracts (Bergin 1946 : 241), two variants are accepted: *diúltadh* and *díltadh*[6]. Therefore, there is no difficulty in taking the *-i-* of the English word from an Irish or Scottish Gaelic original, just like in the case of the final consonant cluster.

In Early Irish, *do·slunidi* has (Byrne Joynt (henceforth *DIL*) 1960 : 375. 9—56) the following range of meanings: 'denies, rejects, renounces, refuses'. There are examples, in Irish, of it being used in the same specialised meaning as the English verb, as for instance in *an ben diultus a fer fein ar gradh fir*

---

[1] Partridge (1966: 320, cf. Klein 1966: 394b) tries to take the verb from the noun, which he in turn derives from a 'dim of *jill*, (feminine) sweetheart: var of *gill*: *Gill, Jill*, pet-forms of *Gillian*;...' I find this rather improbable.

[2] Ó Dónaill 1977: 419 and Dwelly 1911: 343a; these have the 2 sg. ipv. as headword.

[3] Cf. Thurneysen 1946: 27—28 and 351 for the interchange, in the Old Irish verb, of deuterotonic and prototonic verbal forms. The latter are much more common as a base for regularised Middle and Modern Irish paradigms (cf. Pedersen 1913: 250—251).

[4] *DIL* 1960: 374.85 and 84. Cf. further Pedersen 1913: 632 and Thurneysen 1946: 98.

[5] See further Greene 1962: 623 and 1976: 44 as well as Pedersen 1909: 338.

[6] In these tracts, the verbal noun normally functions as headword (cf. Bergin 1938: 211).

ele[7] 'the woman, who rejects her own husband for the love of another man' and *rodiult Sir Gyi m'ingen-sa do bancheile*[8] 'Sir Guy has refused my daughter as wife'. In Modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic, it has more or less the same meanings: Dinneen (1927 : 344b—345a) lists (under the 1st sg. *diúltaighim* as headword) the following meanings: 'I deny, refuse, oppose, renounce ...; I jilt', Dwelly (loc. cit.) gives (under [cf. p. xi] the 'ROOT or THEME' *diùlt*) these: 'Refuse. 2. Misgive, reject, deny, disown' and Ó Dónaill (loc. cit.: under *diúltaigh*) has: '1'. Deny, refuse... 2. Renounce, repudiate... 3. Decline company, shrink from ...'. From our point of view, his most interesting example, amongst those given to illustrate current usage, is: *D'iarr sé í agus dhiúltaigh sí é* 'he asked her (in marriage) and she refused him'.

The second word this note treats of is *twig*, which Hoad (1986 : 510b) discusses as follows:

> twig 1 (sl.) look at, perceive XVIII, understand
> XIX. of unkn. orig.

Once again, the account of the word's history is based on that found in *OED*[9]. Here we find meaning '*a*. To watch; to look; to inspect' first attested from 1764, meaning '*b*. To become aware of by seeing; to perceive, discern, catch sight of; to recognize' evidenced from 1796 and '2. *fig*. To understand, comprehend' from 1815. This last one now seems like the most usual meaning of the word in English: Sykes (1976 : 1255b) lists these meanings only: 'Understand, catch the meaning of, ...; perceive, observe'.

The arguments adduced, above, against an English origin for *jilt* apply here too. On the other hand, even some English etymologists have suggested a Celtic origin. Thus Partridge[10] describes it as follows:

> *twig* (2), to understand, to detect: coll: either Ga *tuig* or, less prob, the syn Ir *twuigim* (OIr *tuiccim, tuccim*), I understand.

This, as it seems to me, is fundamentally correct, even if I should personally find it rather difficult to determine whether an Irish or a Scottish Gaelic origin is the more likely. In any case, a few observations about the Goidelic word may

---

[7] This is from an unedited religious text in a fifteenth-century manuscript: cf. *DIL* 1960: 375.27—28 and Mulchrone and Fitzpatrick 1943: 3358.

[8] Like the one mentioned in the previous note, this manuscript dates (Robinson 1908: 9) from the fifteenth century. For my example, see p. 63.z and cf. 33.24 for a similar one, listed in *DIL* (1960:375.61).

[9] Vol. XI, 1933: 529c. There are three other verbs *twig* listed here, but I cannot see a good connection between them and *twig, v.*[4], which is the one I am discussing.

[10] 1958: 745a; cf. Klein 1966: 790. Neither deals at all with the other verbs *twig* v.[1-3].

be in order. Firstly, it must be noted that this too is part of the core lexicon of Irish and Scottish Gaelic, from the earliest days. In Old Irish, it forms part of the suppletive paradigm of *do·beir*[11], which means 'gives, places; brings, gets' and has perfective forms supplied by **to-rat* in the meaning 'gives, places' and **to-ucc* for 'brings, gets'. This latter base is also used as a separate complete paradigm in the meaning 'understand'. The Old Irish deuterotonic 3 sg. *do·ucci* corresponds to the prototonic *·tucci*, from which later forms are descended, namely Modern Irish *tuig* (Ó Dónaill 1977 : 1283) and Scottish Gaelic *tuig* (Dwelly 1911 : 979b). It should be noted that in Modern Irish the -*u*- functions as a glide only, indicating that the preceding consonant belongs to the non-palatalised class, so that there is excellent correspondence between Irish *tuig* and English *twig*.

In Early Irish, *do·ucci* would seem (*DIL* 1959 : 212.20—84) to have at least the following meanings: 'comprehends, understands: ... perceives, observes, is aware of: ... thinks, opines, considers: ... means, signifies: ... understands (of), applies *or* refers to: ...'. Later, most of these meanings are still current, as for instance in Modern Irish, according to Dinneen (1927 : 1270a, s.v. *tuigim*): 'I understand, comprehend, discern, realise; ...', Ó Dónaill (1977 : 1283, s.v. *tuig*): 'Understand. 1. Know meaning of, comprehend ... 2. Know nature of... 3. Know reason for... 4. Have feeling for... 5. Realize... 6. Assume to be true...', etc. and in Scottish Gaelic, according to Dwelly (1911 : 979b), s.v. *tuig*): 'Understand, perceive, discern, comprehend'. This covers the meanings given in *OED* (loc. cit.) quite well, with the exception, perhaps, of the very first set ('To watch; to look at; to inspect'). Given, however, that this seems not to be current now, it appears reasonable to derive it from the more general meaning 'to understand' etc. Finally, it may be noted that the English word is restricted, as regards register, to slang and colloquial speech, whereas the Irish and Scottish Gaelic words belong to the core lexicon. This is just as I should expect. An exact parallel is found in the Swedish of Finland: *snajo* 'nous, cop on' is not uncommon among urban speakers, but only in the colloquial register, whereas the original Russian word знаю 'I know' has no such restrictions imposed upon it.

In conclusion, then, I have to point out that there is nothing fundamentally new in this note. I have merely treated two etymologies that have been known at least to Celticists for some time, added further evidence with basic references, in the hope that this direct the attention of Anglicists to items like these. As it seems to me, they ought to be better known to, and understood by English etymologists, than they presently appear to be.

---

[11] *DIL* 1959: 202.69, cf. Thurneysen 1946: 469 and Pedersen 1913: 469—472 as well as Vendryes 1978: U—13—14 and Pokorny 1959: 347 for the (more than likely) separate IE origins of the forms meaning 'understand' and 'bring, get'.

REFERENCES

Aalto, P. and A. Sovijärvi (eds.) 1962. *Proceedings of the 4th International Congress of Phonetic Sciences.* The Hague: Mouton.

Bergin, O. J. 1938. "The native Irish grammarian", *Proceedings of the British Academy* 24.205—235.

Bergin, O. J. 1946. "Irish grammatical tracts III. Irregular verbs". (Supplement to) *Eriu* 14.167—250.

Byrne, Mary E. and Maud Joynt 1959. 1960. *Dictionary of the Irish language* [= *DIL*], degra-dodelbtha, dodénta-dúus. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy [compact edition 1983].

Dinneen, P. S. 1927[2] [1904]. *Irish-English dictionary.* Dublin: Irish Texts Society.

Dwelly, E. 1911. *The illustrated Gaelic-English dictionary.* Glasgow: A. MacLaren and Sons [repr. 1971: Gairm Productions].

Greene, D. 1962. "The colouring of consonants in Old Irish". In Aalto, P. and A. Sovijärvi (eds.) 1962. 622—624.

Greene, D. 1976. "The diphthongs of Old Irish". *Ériu* 27.26—45.

Hoad, T. F. 1986. *The concise Oxford dictionary of English etymology.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Klein, E. 1966. *A comprehensive etymological dictionary of the English language.* Amsterdam, London, New York: Elsevier.

Lewy, E. 1956. "Zu den irisch-englischen Beziehungen". *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 57.315—318.

Lewy, E. 1966. "Einige englische und irische Worte". *Celtica* 7. 188; *Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft* 19. 59.

Mulchrone, Kathleen and Elizabeth Fitzpatrick 1943. *Catalogue of Irish manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy* XXVII. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy.

Ó Dónaill, N. 1977. *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla.* Dublin: Stationery Office.

OED 1933. *Oxford English dictionary.* V H—K, XI T—U. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

O'Rahilly, T. F. 1972[2] [1932]. *Irish dialects past and present.* Dublin: Browne and Nolan [[2]Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies].

Partridge, E. 1968[4] [1958]. *Origins. A short etymological dictionary of modern English.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Pedersen, H. 1913 [1909]. *Vergleichende Grammatik der keltischen Sprachen* I, II. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.

Pokorny, J. 1959. *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch.* Berne, Munich: Francke Verlag.

Robinson, F. N. 1908. "The Irish lives of Guy of Warwick and Bevis of Hampton". *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 6. 9—180, 273—338, 556.

Sykes, J. B. 1976[6]. *The concise Oxford dictionary of current English.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Thurneysen, R. 1946. *A grammar of Old Irish.* Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies.

Vendryes, J. 1908. *Grammaire du vieil-irlandais.* Paris: Guilmoto.

Vendryes, J. 1978 [1974]. *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien* R S, T U. Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies; Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique [Ed. by E. Bachellery and P.—Y. Lambert].