

CELTIC ELEMENTS IN ENGLISH  
VOCABULARY – A CRITICAL REASSESSMENT<sup>1</sup>

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1. The present and past languages of the British Isles provide a rich source of data for research in language development and contact linguistics. Sture Ureland (1991: 13) has recently proposed an impressive list of 34 possible and actual contact patterns of the languages spoken in the British Isles from “Caesar to Cromwell and Thatcher”. Various Celtic-English contacts account for more than one third of this list; additionally, the Insular Celtic languages have coexisted with English for 1,500 years, and the contacts, especially more recent, are relatively well documented.

Though linguists still vary in their estimation of the Celtic influence upon the English language (for a useful overview see Majewicz 1984), most studies claim that the impact was minimal.<sup>2</sup> The main aim of this brief note is to discuss some possible extensions of the Celtic lexical influences upon English.<sup>3</sup>

2. When discussing Celtic words in English one is confronted with three main issues: the number of items, the period of borrowing, and the source language(s).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an extensively revised version of Stalmaszczyk (1995). Work on the research reported here was conducted at the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, University of Wales (Aberystwyth). I wish to express my thanks to the staff of the Centre for creating excellent atmosphere for research.

<sup>2</sup> The remarks in Barber (1993: 101): “the number of Celtic words taken into English in the whole of its history has been very small”, and Baugh – Cable (1993: 74): “the Celtic influence remains the least of the early influences that affected the English language”, are representative of this approach. Also Bednarczuk (1988: 686) mentions the minimal number of borrowings, however, he also points to the existence of ‘toponymic calques’, which according to him may have arisen due to temporary bilingualism. The same point was already made by Jackson ([1994]: 243-246).

<sup>3</sup> The issue of Celtic elements in place-names falls outside the scope of this paper, for detailed discussions see Reaney (1964: 71-98) and Cameron (1977: 33-46).

The periods of borrowing reflect the conventional periodization of English, and the estimated figures are the following:<sup>4</sup>

- Old English (450-1100): 9-23
- Middle English (1100-1500): 50-80
- Early Modern English (1500-1700): 60-85
- Late Modern English (1700- ): 55-102.

The Celtic words found in Old English belong to three different groups: (a) early continental loans, (b) words adopted from Old British after the middle of the fifth century, and (c) ecclesiastical and religious loan-words from Old Irish introduced by Irish missionaries during the seventh century:<sup>5</sup>

- (1) a. OE *rice*, surviving in Modern English as the second element of 'bishopric', from Celtic *rix* (cf. OIr. *rí*, gen. *ríg* 'king')
- b. OE *brocc*, surviving in dialect English *brock* 'badger'; from Old Brit. *\*brokkos* (cf. Welsh, Cornish, Breton *broch* 'badger')
- c. OE *dry* 'magician, sorcerer'; from OIr. *druí*, pl. *druí* 'magician, druid'

Strictly speaking, of the three groups mentioned above, only the Old British loans meet precisely the criterion of 'Celtic borrowings in Old English': on the one hand, the earliest forms originate in the continental period, and therefore they belong to the Celtic element present already in Common Germanic.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, ecclesiastical Old Irish borrowings in most cases are ultimately of Latin origin (e.g. OE *ancor* < OIr. *anchara* < Lat. *anachoreta* 'a hermit, anchorite'; OE *cross* < OIr. *cross* < Lat. *crux* 'cross'). In the light of the above facts, even if the list of Celtic loan-words is extended to 23 (as in Ito 1987: 28), one has to agree that the Celtic element in Old English was rather marginal.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, however, a careful re-examination of Old English texts (even the very well known ones) might disclose further borrowings, as recently demonstrated by Andrew Breeze (1994-1995) with respect to the word *deorc*

<sup>4</sup> For the chronological division of English see Fisiak (1993: 24-25). The discrepancies in the above figures reflect different estimates made in various studies. For a comprehensive analysis and tentative classification of Celtic loan-words attested in several major English dictionaries see Ito (1987, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> In this discussion I provide single examples only, for a more comprehensive treatment cf. Serjeantson (1935: 55-60).

<sup>6</sup> This is also the case of one of the oldest Celtic loan-words attested in Germanic – 'iron' (OE *iren*; Gmc. *\*isarnam* < Celt. *\*isarno-*; cf. Irish *iarann*, Welsh *haearn* 'iron'). Cf. Zabrocki (1963: 71-78) for a discussion of the early Celto-Germanic contacts, Evans (1981) for a more recent and comprehensive treatment, Polomé (1983) for a discussion of Celto-Germanic isoglosses in the field of metallurgy, and words dealing with healing and clothing, and De Bernardo Stempel (1992) for a re-examination of the Celto-Germanic isoglosses *fork*, *iron*, and the derivational suffix *-enka-*.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. recently Kastovsky (1992: 318): "the traces Celtic has left on the emerging Anglo-Saxon dialects are minimal – not even a definable phonological substratum has been established".

'bloody' from *The Dream of the Rood*. Breeze convincingly proves that this word reflects Old Irish *derg* 'red, bloody' and is therefore a loan from Irish, which "indicates Irish influence on Northumbrian English" (Breeze 1994-1995: 167).<sup>8</sup>

3. As noted by Serjeantson (1935: 60), very few Irish, Scottish Gaelic, and Welsh words appeared in Middle English earlier than in the second half of the fourteenth century, in spite of the English invasions of Ireland during the reign of Henry II, and even earlier everyday contacts with Wales and Scotland.<sup>9</sup> Later contacts provided English with more words of Celtic origin, however, the largest estimated number does not exceed three hundred. Samples of better known words surviving in contemporary (general) English are provided below, together with identification of the donor language.<sup>10</sup>

- (2) a. Irish – *banshee* (< *bean* 'woman' + *sidhe* 'fairy hill'), *bawn* (< *bó* 'cow' + *dún* 'fortress'), *galore* (< *go* 'to' + *leór* 'sufficiency'), *shamrock* (< *seamróg*, dim. of *seamar* 'clover'), *Tory* (< *tóraigheachd* 'pursuit')
- b. Scottish Gaelic – *bard* (< *bárd* 'poet, rhymer'), *ben* (< *beann* 'peak'), *bog* (< *bogach* 'soft'), *dulse* (< *duileasg* 'edible seaweed'), *glen* (< *gleann* 'mountain valley'), *loch* (< *loch* 'lake'), *slogan* (< *sluagh* 'army' + *gairm* 'shout, cry'), *ptarmigan* (< *tarmachan* 'grouse', *p-* after Greek words in *pt-*), *whisky* (< *uisge beatha* 'water of life')
- c. Scottish Gaelic (from Latin) – *clan* (< OIr. *cland* < L. *planta*), *capercaillzie* (< *capull coile* 'great horse of the wood' – 'wood-grouse')
- d. Manx Gaelic – *carvel* (< *carval* 'carol'), *lochan* (< *loghan* 'pool'), *lough* (< *logh* 'lake')
- e. Welsh – *corgi* (< *cor* 'dwarf' + *ci* 'dog'), *cromlech* (< *crom* 'bowed, arched' + *llech* 'flat stone'), *cwm* (< *cwm* 'valley, glen'), *gull* (< *gwylan* 'seagull'), *gwyniad* (< *gwyn* 'white'), *flannel* (< *gwlan* 'wool')
- f. Cornish – *wrasse* (< *wrach*, mutated form of *gwrach* 'kind of fish; ugly old woman')

<sup>8</sup> Cf. also Breeze (1993) for several other plausible Celtic etymologies for Old and Middle English words.

<sup>9</sup> Barber (1976: 168) provides the following numbers for loanwords in Middle English: French 223, Latin 59, French or Latin 12, Old Norse 13, Dutch or Low German 5, Celtic 2.

<sup>10</sup> See Parry-Williams (1963: 42-48) for remarks on the Welsh element in English, and Thomson (1983: 153-154) for a brief survey of Gaelic loanwords in English. Etymologies of English words in this paper are quoted after Onions (1966) and Hoad (1986).

- g. Breton (via French) – *dolmen* (< *taol* ‘table’ + *maen* ‘stone’),<sup>11</sup>  
*menhir* (< *maen* ‘stone’ + *hir* ‘long’).

The above facts seem to justify the commonly held opinion that “outside of place-names the influence of Celtic upon the English language is almost negligible” (Baugh – Cable 1993: 85);<sup>12</sup> additionally most of the loanwords “remain firmly associated with the land of their origin, its terrain and the life of its people” (Thomson 1983: 154),<sup>13</sup> it also has to be stressed that lexical borrowings have been predominantly one-way, i.e. from English to the Celtic languages.<sup>14</sup>

4. The above approach, however, fails to recognize the intricate issue of Celtic influences upon regional varieties of English. Outside Ireland (and more generally, outside Celtic studies) it is only in more recent publications dealing with dialects of English where this issue receives a comprehensive treatment from specialists in the English language.<sup>15</sup>

Below, I provide some examples of Celtic items found in only one variety of English: Cornish (especially from Western Cornwall). The choice of Cornish English is motivated by two factors: firstly, of all the English dialects under Celtic influence, Cornish is the smallest (with the possible exception of Manx English);<sup>16</sup> secondly, the Celtic language of Cornwall died out already by the end of the eighteenth century (and ceased to be a community language even earlier), and therefore we may conclude that the Celtic elements in the present-day Cornish English dialect are well established:<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The *OED* (2nd edition) suggests a Cornish origin of this word (< *tolmen* ‘hole of stone’).

<sup>12</sup> However, as noted by Ahlqvist (1988: 69), Celtic languages “may have contributed somewhat more to the present make-up of the English language than is sometimes accepted by English scholars”. Ahlqvist proves this by providing Celtic sources for etymologies of two English words whose origin was previously regarded unknown or uncertain: *jilt* ‘abruptly reject or abandon’ (cf. OIr. *diltai*) and *twig* ‘understand, perceive’ (cf. Ir. *tuig*, id.).

<sup>13</sup> Origins of the following English words can be traced back to Gaulish (borrowed via Latin and Old French) – *ambassador*, *budget*, *change*, *chariot*, *mine*, *quay*, *truant*, *vassal*; in this case, however, there is no direct association between English and the Celtic language.

<sup>14</sup> Parry-Williams (1963: 42-43) remarks on the “very much one-way traffic” in English-Welsh contacts, cf. also, the comment on Cornish-English contact in Wakelin (1991: 203): “the lexical borrowings have been almost mainly one-way: from English ... into Cornish – with a few the opposite way”.

<sup>15</sup> See especially, Trudgill (1984) and Wells (1982). Earlier, local varieties of English in Ireland were thoroughly discussed in numerous Irish studies: Henry (1957), Hogan (1927) and Joyce ([1979]). Cf. also the most recent publication on Ulster dialect, Macafee (1996).

<sup>16</sup> For early surveys of Manx English, cf. Moore (1924) and Gill (1934).

<sup>17</sup> The Cornish English items come from Phillipps (1993), the Cornish (Celtic) glosses are from Morton Nance ([1990]); the spelling for most of these words (both in Cornish and Cornish English) is far from standardized. See a useful discussion of some of these items, and several others, in Wakelin (1975: 180-201).

- (3) *bannel* ‘broom’ (the plant) < *banal*, id.  
*bravish* ‘moderately well’ < *breyf* ‘fine, well’  
*bussa* ‘coarse earthenware pot’ < \**bussa* (< *bus* ‘meat, food’ + *seit* ‘pot’)  
*caunce* ‘the paved yard of a dwelling house’ < *cauns* ‘paved or cobbled way’  
*clicky* ‘left-handed’ < *clodhyas*, id.  
*dram* ‘a swath of hay’ < *dram* ‘swath of cut corn’  
*muryan* ‘ant’ < *muryonen*, id.  
*padgethy-pow* ‘newt’ < *peswar-paw* ‘newt, lizard’ (lit. ‘four-feet’)  
*peeth* ‘a well’ < *pyth* ‘pit, shaft, well’  
*quilkyn* ‘frog’ < *gwylskyn*, id.  
*scaw* ‘elder-tree’ < *scawen*, col. *scaw*, id.  
*stean* ‘large earthenware pot’ < *sten* ‘earthenware jar’  
*wrasse* ‘old woman, witch’ < *gwrach*, id.

It is worth noting, that of the above listed words, only the last two (*stean*, with a suggested Old English etymology, and *wrasse*) are included in the second edition of the *OED*. The dictionary though, lists several additional dialect words of Cornish origin, in most cases connected with the mining industry and probably obsolete by now.

The Cornish English dialect provides also some examples of possible semantic influence of Celtic languages upon dialect English. The Cornish word *serth* expresses two different concepts – ‘steep’ and ‘stiff’, and according to Wakelin (1975: 200) the two senses (or in his words ‘functions’) may have been separately translated into English and as a result both of them can express the notion ‘steep’ (cf. below for a similar process in Irish English).

The second example is connected with the word used in Devon and Cornwall for a weasel: ‘white-neck’ which corresponds exactly to Cornish *conna-gwyn* ‘weasel’ (< *conna* ‘neck’ + *gwyn* ‘white’), and therefore the English dialect word can be considered a calque on the Cornish compound.<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that a (formally) similar calque exists in Hiberno-English: *devil’s needle* ‘dragon fly’ (< Ir. *snathad-a’-diabhail* Joyce [1979]: 246), a name extended also to other insects (‘daddy-long-legs’, ‘cranefly’, ‘rove beetle’, cf. Macafee 1996: 95-96).

5. In contrast to Cornish English, the English dialects of Ireland are relatively well described (cf. the studies mentioned in note 13). For obvious reasons, the number of Irish elements, especially in colloquial language, is considerable; for

<sup>18</sup> The example and discussion based on Wakelin (1975: 200-201); Phillipps (1993: 59) notes the form *whitneck*.



example, a recent study on the Anglo-Irish dialect of Forth and Bargy (Co. Wexford), shows that out of the circa 260 lexical items specific to this dialect, more than 60 are of Irish origin (Ó Muirthe 1990: 149-162).<sup>19</sup>

Other possible traces of Celtic influences upon regional varieties of English may be noticed in Anglo-Irish morphology and lexical semantics. As far as morphological influences are concerned, the only commonly observed, and relatively productive, is the process of diminutive formation in Irish English. The process in question makes use of the Irish diminutive suffix *-ín* (which becomes *-een* in English) and is attested in the following examples of loan-words:<sup>20</sup>

- (4) *bawneen* 'a loose white jacket of home-made undyed flannel' (< Ir. *báinín* 'flannel; a white jacket' < *bán* 'white')  
*boreen* 'small road, narrow lane, byroad' (< Ir. *bóthairín* 'a lane' dim. of *bóthar* 'road')  
*colleen* 'a girl' (< Ir. *cailín* dim. of *caile* 'girl, wench; countrywoman')  
*shebeen* 'a place where alcoholic drinks are sold illegally' (< Ir. *sibín* 'illicit whiskey' < *séibe* 'liquid measure, mug'); cf. also derived forms: *shebeening*, *shebeener*.<sup>21</sup>  
*spalpeen* 'rascal, villain; youngster' (< Ir. *spailpín* 'seasonal hired labourer; rude person, scamp').

The productivity of this process can be further illustrated by diminutive forms of personal names and hybrid forms:<sup>22</sup>

- (5) *Pegeen*, *Tomeen*, *Mikeen*  
*boyeen*, *girleen*, *maneen*, *ladeen*, *squireen* 'the owner of a small land property'.

As observed by De Bhaldraithe (1990: 91), it is worth noting that some words in *-een* come originally from English, e.g.:<sup>23</sup>

- (6) E *pink* < Ir. *pincín* < E *pinkeen*  
 E *pot* < Ir. *poitín* < E *poteen*, *pottheen* 'illegally produced whiskey'.

<sup>19</sup> The result is especially interesting as this archaic dialect remained for a long time isolated from the Irish language, cf. the historical account in Hogan (1927: 44-46).

<sup>20</sup> See the discussion of such forms (together with the word index) in De Bhaldraithe (1990).

<sup>21</sup> *Shebeen* is explained in Macafee (1996: 298) as 'the keeper of a shebeen', however, it is often used with the meaning 'a frequenter of the shebeen', cf., for example J.M. Synge *The Aran Island* ([1992]: 94): "this man ... a drunkard and shebeener".

<sup>22</sup> Cf. also the following remark on Ulster dialect: "The Irish diminutive *-ín* has been borrowed into Hiberno-English, and is productive with English roots", Macafee (1996: xxxiv).

<sup>23</sup> De Bhaldraithe (1990: 91) observes that hybrid forms rarely occur in twentieth-century literature, but he nevertheless quotes three such words from J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*: 'houseen', 'priesteen', 'supeen'.

Furthermore, an interesting semantic process may be observed in which English words that replaced Irish terms often inherit their scope of meaning, giving rise to "English words and Irish meanings" (Henry 1958: 166). One striking example is the retention of the metaphorical senses and intensifying force of the Irish colour adjectives *dearg* 'red' and *dubh* 'black':

- (7) red *edge* 'very keen edge' (cf. Ir. *faobhar dearg*)  
 red *war* 'bloody conflict' (cf. Ir. *cogadh dearg*)  
 red *rotten* 'completely decayed' (cf. Ir. *dearg lofa*).

'Black' retains the intensifying function of Irish *dubh* in the following expressions: *black starvation*, *black fast* ('rigorous fast'), *black corruption*, *black Protestant*, *black curse*, *black hole* ('an all-Protestant town'), etc. The following sentences from Henry (1957: 126) are illustrative as far as this usage is concerned:

- (8) *There was red war.*  
 'there was great trouble'  
*An old black wind blew in over the bog.*  
 'a harsh, bitter wind blew over the bog'

Also Manx English provides comparable examples: *black stranger* 'unknown person' and the phrase *I don't care a black dog* (Moore 1924: 14).

The semantic process of coalescence of meanings is involved in the case where one Irish word requires two or more substitutes to cover its different denotations. And so, for instance, the Irish word *garraí* means both 'garden' and 'small (enclosed) field', which may result in the Hiberno-English usage of 'garden' in both these senses,<sup>24</sup> and similarly Irish *sliabh* (1. 'mountain', 2. 'moor') may cause the usage of Irish English 'mountain' with the meaning 'moor'. A further example is provided by the pair Ir. *baile* and E *place*. The Irish word means 'home', but also 'place, spot', and as a result the Hiberno-English *place* is very often used for 'house, home, homestead' (cf. Joyce [1979]: 302).

6. To conclude: the Celtic influence on English vocabulary was not very impressive, especially when Standard British English is considered. However, a closer study of regional varieties and dialects of English spoken in Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Isle of Man, and Cornwall might add a different dimension to research in Celtic-English contacts.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the very interesting, and

<sup>24</sup> Cf. the comment in Joyce ([1979]: 260): "garden in the South, is always applied to a field of growing potatoes". The recent dictionary of Ulster dialect gives the following definition of *garden* (sense 3): "a paddock, a small field" (Macafee 1996: 140).

<sup>25</sup> This point has been already made explicit by John Davies as early as 1881. In a series of contributions to *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (published between 1881-1884) he discussed several hundred (!) English dialect

complex, issue of Celtic influences upon the language and vocabulary of Irish (and Welsh and Scottish, etc.) writers deserves a separate study.<sup>26</sup>

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words of possible Celtic origin, concluding that: "if we examine the dialects of the whole of England, it will be found that a large portion of the Celtic languages has been retained in them" (1884: 2). According to Davies, 1200 words of Celtic origin were retained in Lancashire till the beginning of the 19th century. I am very grateful to Gillie Conway (Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, Aberystwyth) for bringing this series of articles to my attention.

<sup>26</sup> Some insightful analyses have already been provided by Dolan (1984) – on Samuel Beckett, Kiberd (1979) – on J.M. Synge, Pine (1990) – on Brian Friel, and Wales (1992) – on James Joyce. For a concise introduction to the language of Irish literature, see Todd (1989).

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