OF UNKNOWN [?] ORIGIN

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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 seeming excuse for a professional Celti- cist 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* female woman; woman who casts off a lover.

XVII. 'A new casting word' in Blount's Glossographia 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 promise or impression already given)'.

As far as I am aware, no acceptable 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 reserving oneself, as Hoad (loc. cit.) does, to labelling it ‘of unk. 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 Leyw (1956: 317; cf. 1966) had the correct idea in stating that: ‘Das Wort ist — ich darf wohl sagen — offenbar ein irisches Lehmmot: diúltalm, i.e. deny, oppose, renounce, abandon …; I jilt; r1, giving references to Dinneen (1904: 247a. cf. 1927: 34/4a–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 1997: 8–138) is somewhat uncertain, but the occurrence (cf. ibid.) in Welsh of the same root guarantees it a pedigree as a linguistic item inherited from Common Celtic. The standard Modern Irish form diúltaisn [var: diúlit] and Scottish Gaelic diúltxn are the only forms of the Old Irish proto-tonic form diúltas, corresponding to deuteroticonic do-slumadn. The precise phonetic value of palatalised d in Irish and Scottish Gaelic varies from one dialect to another (O'Bakilly 1952: 203–204), but its similarity, everywhere, to the sound of English j is obvious. The long - ò in the modern form of the word has its origin in the glide between the long - ó of the Old Irish form and the following non-palatalised consonant cluster. In the Classical Modern Irish grammatical tracts (Bergin 1994: 241), two variants are accepted: diúltadh and díultadh. There, there is no difficulty in taking the - ò 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-slumadn 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 diúltus a fer fein ar gradh fir ele’ ‘the woman, who rejects her own husband for the love of another man’, and rodhull Sir Gyi m'ineng-sa do banchailt. ‘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. diúltais in as headword) the following meanings: ‘I deny, refuse, oppose, renounce …; I jilt’, Dwelly (loc. cit.) gives (under [cf. p. xi] the “ROOT OR THEME’ diúl) these: ‘Refuse. 2. Missive, reject, deny, disown’ and Ó Dónaill (loc. cit.: under diúltise 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’uair sé a agus diúltais sé e he she asked her (in marriage) and she refused him.”

The second word this note treats of is twit, which Hoad (1958: 510b) discusses as follows:

twit 1 (al.) look at, perceive XVIII, understand XIX. of unk. orig.

Once again, the account of the word’s history is based on that found in GED*. Here we find meaning ‘a. To watch; to look; to inspect’ first attested from 1764, meaning ‘a. 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 looks like the most usual meaning of the word in English: Sykes (1767: 125/5b) 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 Pruridge* describes it as follows:

twit (2), to understand, to detect: coll: either Ga twic or, less prob, the syn Ir tuwigim (OL twicem, 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

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1 Partridge (1994: 259), cf. Klein (1966: 394b) tries to take the verb from the noun, which he in turn derives from a ‘dim of jilt, (feminine) sweetheart: var of gill: Gill, Jill, pet-fforms of Gillarn:’. I find this rather improbable.

2 Ó Dónaill 1977: 410 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 deuteroticonic and proto-tonic verbal forms. The latter are much more common as a base for regularised Middle and Modern Irish paradigms (cf. Pederson 1913: 250–251).


6 In these tracts, the verbal noun normally functions as headword (cf. Bergin 1958: 211).

7 This is from an unedited religious text in a fifteenth-century manuscript: cf. DIL 1960: 375.27–28 and Mulchrone and Fitzpatrick 1943: 3308.

8 Like the one mentioned in the previous note, this manuscript dates (Robinson 1908: 8) from the fifteenth century. For my example, see p. 63a and cf. 35.24 for a similar one, listed in DIL (1960: 376.4).

9 Vol. XI, 1933: 62a. There are three other verbs twit listed here, but I cannot see a good connection between them and twit, u5, which is the one I am discussing.

10 1958: 745a; cf. Klein 1966: 790, Neither deals at all with the other verbs twit u1–3.
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-veis\textsuperscript{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-ucc\textsuperscript{11} corresponds to the protothetic -tucc*, from which later forms are descended, namely Modern Irish tuig (Ó Dónaill 1977: 1283) and Scottish Gaelic tuig (Dewelly 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-pa-latalised class, so that there is excellent correspondence between Modern Irish tuig and English tuig. In Early Irish, do-ucc\textsuperscript{11} 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 Dinnéen (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 Dewelly (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: snäja 'nous, cop on' is not uncommon among urban speakers, but only in the colloquial register, whereas the original Russian word snájo '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 Celtiasts for some time, added further evidence with basic references, in the hope that this direct the attention of Celtiasts 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.

\textsuperscript{11} DIL 1959: 202.66; cf. Thurneman 1946: 469 and Pedersen 1913: 469—472 as well as Vendryes 1978: U—13—14 and Pokorny 1939: 347 for the (more than likely) separate IE origins of the forms meaning 'understand' and 'bring, get'.

REFERENCES


