Abstract

The article revisits the etymological explanations of a number of English names for ‘young female person’. The etymology of English girl has been dealt with repeatedly. It seems best to project the noun back to OE gierela ‘garment’. Even if the connection can be justified from the semantic point of view, the initial stop consonant of girl must be accounted for. The phonology of girl can be explained if we assume that the word was taken over from what may be called a “barn-dialect” in Old English. ModE maid is not just an elliptical form of maiden, but is the result of an influence by the latter on a ME pre-stage maith. ModE dial. maw’r and mawther may go back to OE mágutūdor. OE ides may be traced back to an IE form *(e)iti(m)os ‘course of the world’, a derivate of *ei ‘to go’ (an ides is then a ‘woman determining one’s fate). OE sceilcen, a feminine of scealc, may eventually originate in the IE root *(s)kel- ‘bent, crooked’ (with a -k(o)-suffix).

Introduction

The history of the word-fields “boy” and “girl” are characterized by a high degree of fluctuation in English as well as in other languages from both an onomasiological and semasiological standpoint. Although the expressions for ‘female young person’ in English language history have already been analyzed by Bück (1934) and Stibbe (1935)—for Old English—and Diensberg (1985)—for Middle English, these contributions did not answer all problems. Especially the Modern English girl has not been clarified to a sufficient degree yet. This article will therefore shed some new light on the biography of ModE girl as well as some other onomasiological types for ‘female young person’ in the history of English.

1. ModE girl

1.1. In the wake of Robinson’s seminal paper on ‘clothing names’ (Robinson 1967), the etymology of girl has been investigated from various angles in recent years. Since no immediately obvious cognates in the meaning ‘girl’ are available in the related Germanic languages the search for the origin of girl is relatively wide open. Robinson’s proposal has found acceptance in several further discussions, but it has also been more or less vehemently rejected.

1.2. Robinson’s derivation takes its starting-point from OE gierela ‘dress, apparel’, which by Middle English times had come to refer to ‘young person’ by metonymy, and finally the semantic range was narrowed down to ‘young female person’. The semantic development

---

1 A first look into Bück (1949: 87ff.) already illustrates the many changes in different language groups.
2 The essay was reprinted in Robinson (1993) together with an “Afterword 1992”.
3 The preform of OE gierela may be reconstructed as Gmc. *garw-ilan-; the phonology of girl will be discussed in more detail below.
underlying this derivation has been reexamined on several occasions. Thus Diensberg (1984: 473) writes: “the author [i.e. Robinson] bases his hypothesis on gerela, gierela, gyrela ‘habit, robe’ which he takes as typical garments of girls and women, an assumption which is unsupported by evidence”. But Diensberg’s objection is certainly not justified in the way he phrases it: At no stage in his presentation does Robinson define OE gerela as ‘typical garments of girls and women’; he clearly says that gerela is a general term ‘which has the meaning ‘dress, apparel (worn by either sex)’.” (Robinson 1993: 178). In a reevaluation of Robinson’s proposal Terasawa (1993: 341) concludes that the explanation is plausible:

“I would like to subscribe to Robinson’s ingenious and persuasive proposal of OE gyrela ‘apparel’ as the etymon of ME girle. There are, however, the phonological problem of Anlaut as well as some semantic problems left to be explored: when and why OE gyrela ‘dress, apparel in general’ came to be applied to a person of a particular age, i.e. a child or young person; and why ME girle, etc., originally indeterminate with respect to gender, came to be limited to the female sex.”

But in a very detailed examination of the supposed development of ‘apparel’ to ‘human being’ Moerdijk (1994) reaches the verdict that Robinson’s derivation is unwarranted from the semantic point of view.4 Since, however, semantic change can lead to rather surprising innovations it would certainly be foolhardy to maintain immediately that Robinson’s etymology is impossible from the point of view of meaning, even if the assumed route may appear rather complicated.5 But at least one instance may be mentioned, which seems to have undergone a parallel semantic development. ModE brat is attested from the sixteenth century onwards, and according to the OED the origin of the word is unknown. Phonologically there would be no problem at all to link brat with OE bratt, a hapax legomenon found in the interlinear gloss to Matthew 5.40 in the Lindisfarne Gospels: remitte et pallium is glossed by forlet 7 hraegl 7 haeca 7 bratt (Skeat 1887: 51) The word is probably borrowed from Old Irish.6 In Middle Englisch brat means a piece of clothing. It would seem reasonable to identify the Early Modern English word brat ‘child’ with this term, because otherwise no etymological connection can be proposed for this noun.7 A similar example from Swedish is flicka ‘girl’, which goes back to ON flük ‘patch, rag’ (Hellquist 1980). The specialization of meaning from ‘child’ to ‘girl’ is paralleled by OE bearn (now ‘girl’ in northern dialects), OE cild (now ‘girl’ in in southern dialects), ModE baby (which in colloquial, slangy language is used to refer to (young) women).8

1.3. Even if thinkable from the semantic angle, an etymology must nevertheless obey the rules of sound development, and here Robinson’s account seems to face some obstacles. This issue will be dealt with in the following paragraphs.

---

4 Moerdijk summed up his discussion as follows: “That his [i.e. Robinson’s] etymology will appear untenable, is an implicit result of my analysis” (Moerdijk 1994: 43). Moerdijk actually bases his discussion on Robinson’s 1967 text and does not seem to have been aware of the reissue (with update) in Robinson 1993. Neither Diensberg (1984) nor Terasawa (1993) are mentioned by Moerdijk.

5 A particularly rich overview of past attempts at clarifying the etymology of girl is provided by Liberman 1998. Liberman himself favours a borrowing from Low German: “Girl is LG Gör ‘girl’, with a diminutive suffix, borrowed into English” (Liberman 1998: 160).

6 OE bratt was interpreted as a borrowing from Celtic by Förster (1921: 125); but see further Ekwall (1922: 76).

7 A further possible parallel can perhaps be recognized in brogue ‘strongly marked provincial accent’, although here the development would seem to be one step more complicated still. The word brogue ‘rough shoe of Ireland and the Scottish highlands’ is likely to be borrowed from Irish bróg. In order to explain the meaning ‘provincial accent’ we may have to assume that the word was used in the sense ‘person wearing a brogue (a rough shoe)’, and by a further metonymy the term for the person was transferred to another characteristic of the person, namely his way of speaking.

8 This usage is attested as early as 1915 (cf. OED, s.v. babe).
1.4. The Old English word whose reflex Robinson wants to recognize in girl is “gyrela” (also spelled, although less frequently, gerela and gi(e)rela), a noun of common occurrence” (Robinson 1993: 178). The main steps in the sound development of Gmc. *garw-ilan- to Old English are as follows: -a- was ‘brightened’ to æ, g- /r/-l was palatalized to g- /r/-l, and in the sequence garw- breaking led to gearw-;[9] then -i- of the suffixal element -ilan- caused i-umlaut resulting in *giervalia at a prehistoric stage of West Saxon, whereas outside of West Saxon we would expect *giervalia. In both forms the medial -i- should undergo syncope, but the sequence -rwl- could develop a svarabhakti vowel, so that the result might indeed be gi-era or ge-rela (with loss of -w-). With regard to the phonology of the word in question Robinson offered the following comment: “Although Old English spelling is not to be trusted in this respect, it should be mentioned that of the fifty-nine quotations in Bosworth-Toller’s Dictionary and Supplement containing the element gyrela, thirty are spelled with y, fifteen with i(e), and fourteen with e. These spellings may well reflect y developed from “unstable i” in late Old English.” (Robinson 1993: 179, note 21). All the forms considered so far undoubtedly had palatal g /r/-l in initial position, their reflex could be *yirl in Modern English: The /g/-l of girl requires an explanation.

1.5. Robinson was aware of the problem and suggested that /g/-l in girl could be due to “Northern dialect or foreign influence” (Robinson 1993: 179, note 21). The notion of “foreign influence” would probably entail the assumption that a borrowing from Scandinavian occurred, which is actually the approach Terasawa (1993: 341) adopted: “Robinson suggested that Northern, i.e. Scandinavian phonological influence may be responsible for the initial plosive”. But “Scandinavian influence” is hardly sufficient for explaining the initial of girl, because in the Scandinavian languages no really suitable word is available that could have exerted influence.

1.6. In his “Afterword 1992”, Robinson gave some further details and considered the possibility that girl was borrowed from a dialect of English into the standard language. I will try to follow up this suggestion with some further supporting material and show that Robinson’s etymology is phonologically tenable. If girl is ultimately projected back to Gmc. *garw-ilan-, then we should be able to justify the initial consonant within the rules of the phonological development. A brief discussion of brightening and retraction in Old English is required in this context.

1.7. With the exception of the position before a following nasal, every West Germanic /a/ was generally ‘brightened’ in the period of pre-Old English.[12] But in the account of the phonological development in the sequence *garwi- as given above in 4. one important modification must be made. It has to be stressed that in a limited area of the Old English territory, “retraction” of æ > a occurred before r + consonant in a labial environment before the processes of breaking and i-umlaut: The forms uard (WS weard ‘guardian’), barnum

---

9 The word is indeed common to all dialects of Old English; see Wenisch (1979: 290).
10 The question of whether palatal diphthongization occurred in the form we are concerned with need not detain us here, because the result would be the same as that of breaking.
11 <g> (= palatalized /h/-l) and <g> (= velar /g/) will be consistently differentiated in this paper because the opposition is of vital importance. Old English manuscripts use one grapheme only to represent /i/ and /g/ and also inherited /l/, which fell together with /l/.
12 Brightening is not found if the root vowel /a/ was followed by a, o, u (e.g. [plural] dagas ~ dæg), but it is usually assumed that /a/ had indeed been brightened to [æ] and then reverted to /a/ under the influence of the vowel in the following syllable.
15 Problems of Anglian vocalism were dealt with by Kuhn on several occasions; see Kuhn (1939) and Kuhn (1945). With regard to the glossaries Dieter (1885) is still a major source of information.

16 The development of Gmc. *garwidun > OE geredon was dealt with by Chadwick (1899: 145).

17 On both æ and e as the root vowel in this verb see further Toon (1983: 131).
'human being (wearing this garment)’ by metonymy can be paralleled by brat. The meaning of ‘girl’ was further restricted from ‘young human being’ > ‘female young human being’.

2. ModE maiden and maid

2.1. The form maiden is the regular representative of OE mægden ‘girl, maiden; unmarried woman; nun; virgin; Virgin Mary; female servant’. The form can be traced back to IE maghos (cf. IEW 696; Bäck’s [1934: 200] reconstructed protoform IE *makʰuí- should be corrected here).

2.2. The form maid is seen as an elliptical variant of maiden by the OED and Diensberg (1985: 331). In the IEW maid is considered the continuant of mægeh ‘maiden; unmarried woman; daughter; virgin; servant; woman; Virgin Mary’. Neither of the views suffices entirely. But it does not seem impossible to regard this form more precisely as a folk-etymological continuant of OE mægd. The regular ME form should be maith, as it is still attested in maithhod ‘maidenhood’ (1230), með adj. ‘of a maiden’ (1225) and meiðlure ‘loss of virginity, fornication’ (1230) (cf. MED). The first record of maid dates from 1205 (Lay. 256) according to the OED. The first half of the thirteenth century thus seems to be a period of co-existence between forms ending in a dental spirant and those ending in a dental plosive. The latter maybe represents the result of seeing maith as directly connected with maiden, or of putting it into direct connection, in the shape of a short form.

3. ModE dial. [mæða] and [mɔː]

3.1. These rare forms are only recorded in the SED (item VIII.1.3. in Norfolk and Suffolk) and in the EDD (s.v. maw’r and mawther). The etymology of these words seems nowhere to be dealt with.

3.2. It seems possible that these forms are continuants of the OE mágutūdur ‘descendant, offspring’ (Grein 1912: 449, Hall 1960: 228). This form is labelled “poetic” by Hall, but it is not impossible that a poetic term in the standard dialect, or koine, is nevertheless quite current in some dialects. Regularly expectable continuants of mágutūdur would be mawder or mawter (syncope of unstressed or weakly stressed syllables). If we depart from the former, then the ending -daður, in a second step, yielded -daðer, just like togeder became together; in addition this phonetic development may also have been incited by the endings in father, brother and mother.

4. OE ides

4.1. The basic meaning of OE ides is ‘woman, wife, virgin, lady, queen’, but it occasionally adopts the sense of ‘girl’ in some cases (cf. Bäck 1934: 234). The quantity of the i- is not clear. Brate lists reasons for both short and long i.

4.2. The origin of OE ides and formally and semantically similar forms, such as OHG itis, OS idis, ON dis, Go. fila-deisei in other Indo-European languages has been a hotly debated issue. Early theories (by J. Grimm, R. Kögel, F. Jostes, Th. von Grienberger, Uhlenbeck) are summarized in an article by Erik Brate (1911/12). Brate himself departs from ON dis, which he defines as ‘woman who comes from another world where she had gone to by her death and who now comes to our world to influence the life and fate of humans’ and reconstructs a Gmc. *ið-i-s, which he interprets as a compound of the Indo-European roots
*ið- ‘again’ and *i- ‘to go’; for him, the *Dises are ‘those who have returned’. But the combination of the roots for ‘again’ and ‘to go’ plus an s-suffix seem not entirely plausible for a meaning ‘those who have returned’. Holthausen (1935: 185) sees a connection with ād ‘stake, fire, flame’, itself related to Lat. aedès ‘house; originally: stove’; but here, too, a semantic filiation seems hardly plausible.

4.3. An alternative hypothesis shall be ventured here—at least for the West Germanic forms. The forms also enable the reconstruction of an Indo-European origin *eitē(n)os (if we assume an OÉ ī) or *itē(n)os (if we assume an OÉ ī). This leads us to the root *ei- ‘to go’ (IEW 294) with t(o)-suffixed forms meaning ‘course [of the world]’, in other words ‘fate’. An *ides was then originally a ‘[woman determining] one’s fate’.

5. OE sceielcen

5.1. OE sceielcen is the corresponding feminine form of OE scealc. Its proper meaning is ‘female servant’. But Bäck (1934: 229) writes that the word denotes a ‘girl, maiden’ on some rare occasions.

5.2. So far, the form scealc has not yet really been etymologized (cf. Kluge/Seebold s.v. Schalk). Cognates of scealc are OHG scalc, OS scalk, Go. skalks, ON skalkr and OFris. skalke. The lexical type seems restricted to the Germanic languages. The original meaning must have been ‘servant’. A possible root maybe IE *(s)kel- ‘to bend; bent, crooked’ with some sort of -k(o)-suffix (cf. OE sceolh ‘crooked’). A servant may metaphorically be seen as the one who bends to his master to demonstrate his inferior position.

References


Buck, Carl D. (1949), A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages, Chicago: Chicago University Press.


Alfred Bammesberger & Joachim Grzega
Englische und Vergleichende Sprachwissenschaft
Katholische Universität Eichstätt
85071 Eichstätt, Germany
alfred.bammesberger@ku-eichstaett.de
joachim.grzega@ku-eichstaett.de
Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 86: 328-336.


EDD = Wright, J. (1898-1905), *The English Dialect Dictionary: Complete Vocabulary of All Dialect Words Still in Use, or Known to Have been in Use During the Last Two-Hundred Years*, 6 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press.


received 20 February 2001