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ENGLISH ETYMOLOGIES FROM THE POPULAR REGISTER (I)[1]

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Abstract

Difficulties in tracing the etymology of lexical isolates and loans from other languages are exemplified in the discussion of a gathering of English words previously without satisfactory explanations of origin. In particular, recognition of the adstratum effects of the Irish language on British English over several centuries prompts a call not only for numerous revisions to entries in our standard lexicographical reference works but for a fundamental rethinking of relations between these multiply overlapping speech communities.

A surprising number of words in the vocabulary of English, as recorded in the authoritative *Oxford English Dictionary*, are without satisfactory etymologies. Among these are isolates, if we borrow a term from historical linguistics, which present particular difficulties for the etymologist. The status of isolate entails that no attested or reconstructed Old English form is seen as antecedent and none of the likely sources of a loan, e.g. Old Norse, Norman French, Middle Dutch, offers comparable evidence. Without cognates in other languages, often not part of a word cluster of noun, adjective, and verb, and subject to the shaping influence of the sound system where they are now found, isolates prompt an appeal to extra-linguistic paths of inquiry, such as the likely geographical provenance or specific properties of the designated item.

Lexicographical conventions often entail that the etymologies of loan words in English are not traced back farther than to their immediate source language and

[1] This is the first part of a planned three-part study, succeeding components of which will appear in this journal.

culture. While Middle English vocabulary without Old English antecedents is often projected against the relatively well known backdrop of French and Norman-French, as times even the Old Danish brought to the Danelaw and the future Normandy, and their authoritative historical and etymological dictionaries, occasional loans from other European languages that were not part of sweeping, wholesale linguistic change, as exemplified by the introduction of French to England, often fare less well. Clearly, in our dictionaries, individual English words cannot, like royal pedigrees or, in the current vogue, family histories, be traced back to Adam and his speech, and it seems reasonable to settle for the best available information on the donor vocabulary as found in standard reference works.

Examined in the following is a selection of English words, most of which came to the author's attention in random fashion and which are thus far without satisfactory etymologies or, often, other lexical affiliations. Some few are from the medieval and Renaissance periods, more from early modern and modern times. Several have been subsequently categorized as popular, slang, or cant, and reflect, in a broad sense, earlier public life in the streets and courts of Britain with its ongoing verbal interactions and judgments. When the deeper historical roots of these words are explored, they illustrate the processes and consequences of transcultural adaptation. We begin with some street sounds.

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Hurdy-gurdy: In its etymological note for *hurdy-gurdy*, the *OED* states simply: 'apparently a rhyming combination suggested by the sound of the instrument' (*OED* s.v. *hurdy-gurdy*, n.; accessed 1 September, 2015). In pursuing a more satisfactory explanation of the name, one that need not totally preclude an imitative or echoic factor, we do well to bear in mind the make-up of the early instrument, before the extension of the term *hurdy-gurdy* to the barrel organ:

> A musical instrument of rustic origin resembling the lute or guitar, and having strings (two or more of which are tuned so as to produce a drone), which are sounded by the revolution of a rosined wheel turned by the left hand, the notes of the melody being obtained by the action of keys which 'stop' the strings and are played by the right hand; thus combining the characteristics of instruments of the bowed and the clavier kinds. (*OED*)

In many of the alliterative or rhyming compounds that were formerly common in popular English, more than a superficial association of sounds is at work. The initial relationship of the parts was not one of parity. In the reconstructed pattern of development, a primary lead element with distinct semantics and phonetics attracts a secondary complement that can be seen as a phonetic variant with both similar and dissimilar qualities. The overall pattern of the two elements may be a common initial consonant or cluster followed by varying vocalism, as in *flim-flam*, or differing initial sounds and similar vocalism and concluding consonantism, as in *hurdy-gurdy*. The ubiquitous *–y* ending completes the parallel and seems to have

a familiarizing function, expressing a slight condescension on the part of the speaker toward the object or phenomenon under consideration.

This coloration is apparent in the first attestations of *hurdy-gurdy* in the 1740s and in its association with foreign, more exactly northern Italian, and popular origins: 'Receive this incorrect epistle … not for its wit or its beauty: for it has no more pretence to either, than a hurdygurdy has to harmony' (Luxborough 1775 [Letter 10, 1749]: 152); 'A sightly clown! – and sturdy! Hum! – plays, I see, upon the hurdy-gurdy' (O'Hara 1764: i. 7); 'Hetty went as a Savoyard, with… a Vielle or Hurdy Gurdy round her waist' (Burney 1988 [Journal 10, 1770, I.]: 100). Despite these assumed origins, English *hurdy-gurdy* is, as the *OED* states, without parallels in Italian, French and German, where we find such denominators as *organetto*, *manivella*; *orgue de Barbarie*, *orgue à manivelle, ~ à cylindre, limonaire*; and *Drehleier, Drehorgel, Radleier*, respectively, with an emphasis on how the sound is produced.

In a renewed search for a satisfactory origin for the English term, we should note the appreciably earlier (from 1568) northern English and Scots forms *hirdy-girdy*, mock Latin *hirdum-dirdum*, and *hurly-burly*, which refer not to a musical instrument but to tumult, uproar, disorder, in particular its accompanying noise.[2] Is this then a basic meaning which has been applied, metaphorically, to the musical instrument with its unsophisticated melodies and underlying drone, as the *OED* laconically goes on to suggest?

Were an independent origin for the name to be pursued, one could imagine yet another reference to the make-up of the instrument. Thus, a hypothetical late medieval French **orgue à gourde* 'organ with a gourd-shaped body' (French *gourde* < Latin *cucurbita*). In the subsequent development, the first element would have aligned itself with the second: *orgue* > *horgue* > *horde* > *hurd-y*. Yet we have no evidence of a putative **orgue à gourde*. Medieval French did, however, have a term *hourdis*, *hourdeis* that referred both to wooden scaffolding, fencing, or hurdles (< Old Frankish *hurd*; cf. the Middle English loan of *hurdis, hord* from French, modern English *hoarding*) and to a *mêlée* or massed struggle. It appears that the woven or plaited composition of the hurdle is the source of the metaphorical extension to *mêlée*. This accords well enough with the meanings of Scots *hirdy-girdy*, English *hurly-burly*, etc. but leaves the second element unexplained. Old French *gourdir* (modern French *engourdir*) meant 'to paralyze, deaden, render inert'. Paradoxically, in reference to wine, *gourd*/*gourdi* meant 'to have body' and, in terms of clothes, to be fashionable.[3] Thus, we may imagine a **hourdis gourdi* to be a muffled tumult, noisy, dense *mêlée*, or such like. Scots *hirdy-girdy* and *hirdum dirdum* would then have retained the basic meaning of the collocation.[4]

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[2] The *OED* notes speculation that *dirdum* 'tumultuous noise' may have an origin in Scots Gaelic.

[3] Medieval French knew the expression *huré ou gourdi* 'bad [wine] or good (full-bodied)'; the initial element referred to hair on the head of a person or animal; Godefroy (1881–1902), s.v. *huré*.

[4] Since *hourdis gourdi* is not recorded from France, we must concede that perhaps only *hourdis* migrated to England and that the future compound was the result of the common reduplicating process outlined above.

If this were, indeed, at the origin of *hurdy-gurdy* as the name of the musical instrument, it would mean that the formation was NOT initially directly echoic and reduplicative, although such stimuli would have contributed to shape the final phonetic outcome and strengthen the affect (rustic, simple-minded). The name for the instrument must then be seen as metaphorical: the rumbling rasp of the drones and other strings, amplified by the sound-box, being likened – none too favourably – to the growling tumult of a crowd. This extended signification of Middle English *hurdis* plus complement will then have been a second such transfer: first, *hourdis* 'hurdling' > 'dense interactive crowd', second 'noisy crowd' > musical instrument.[5] The transfer of the term *hurdy-gurdy* to the instrument may have been relatively late in English, as the first attestations from the eighteenth century suggest, with their urbane, lightly xenophobic condescension. From this consideration of common street sounds, the essay turns to those that walked those streets.

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Gander: For *gander* as the designation of the male goose, the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides an etymological commentary whose fullness and richness reflects the greatly enlarged entry parameters afforded by electronic publishing as the *OED Online*. Excerpted, it reads:

> The original stem is perhaps **ganron-*, the *d* being a euphonic insertion between *n* and *r* … Outside of English the word is found only in Dutch, Low German and South German *gander*, Middle Low German *ganre*; the other Germanic languages show different formations. … Although used as the masculine of *goose* n., (Old English *gós* < Old Germanic **gans-*) there is some doubt whether it is etymologically cognate with that word. … It has been conjectured that *gander* may have been originally the special name of some kind of water-bird, and that its association with *goose* is accidental, perhaps arising from the alliterative phrase 'goose and gander' (*OED* s.v. *gander*; accessed 1 September 2015).

As *ganra*/*gandra*, the term is attested in Old English and continues little changed into modern English. Under *Phrases and proverbs*, the dictionary offers early attestations, some of which will be relevant for the following discussion. From the Engish translation of Brant's *Ship of Fools*: 'That gose that styll about wyll wander… Shall home come agayne as wyse as a gander' (Brant 1509: f. lxxiii^{v}). Skelton writes: 'Doctoure Pomaunder, As wise as a gander, Wotes not wher to wander' (Skelton 1843: II. 434, iii [from about 1540]). From 1701, a familiar saw: 'What is Sawce for a Goose is Sawce for a Gander' (Brown 1701: iii, 100). In these pairings are two associations, of rather different kinds: *gander* with *goose* as the male and female of the species, with alliterating names; and *goose*/*gander* and *wander* in an equation of

[5] The semantic slot left open by the application of *hurdy-gurdy* to the musical instrument would seem to have been filled in standard English by *hurly-burly*, whose origin is also given by the *OED* as 'uncertain' but which seems likely to be an off-shoot of the terms discussed here.

behavourial characteristics (hardly exclusive to these birds), with a rhyme *gander/ wander*. To these examples may be added the famiiar nursery rhyme, first recorded in 1784, that begins 'Goosey, goosey, gander, Whither shall I wander'.[6]

The *OED* goes on to identify a figurative use of *gander* as a designation for 'a dull or stupid person; a fool, simpleton'. Then, finding a source in American slang, the dictionary calls attention to *gander* in the sense of 'a look or glance' and refers for further detail to the entry for the verb *to gander*. Here, the above-noted proverbial phrasing finds a parallel, if not an explanation: 'To wander aimlessly, or with a foolish air like that of a gander. Also, to look or glance; to ramble in talk.' (*OED* s.v. *gander*, v.; accessed 1 September, 2015). From *The great French dictionary*: 'To go a gandering, whilst his Wife lies in, *chercher à se divertir ailleurs*' [etc.] (Miège 1687, s.v. *gonder*). The first recorded coupling of the ideas of wandering and rubber-necking is found in 1887: '*Gonder*, to stretch the neck like a gander, to stand at gaze'. 'What a't gonderin' theer fur?' (Darlington 1887, s.v. *gonder*). Detached from the notion of rambling, *gander* achieves independent status as a noun, as in the phrase 'take a gander'. Here, the etymologists of the *OED* may also have gone a-gandering, although these words and their various meanings do raise the methological question of how best to treat words that have discrete and independent origins but later coalesce both phonologically and semantically, albeit often with bizarre results in the latter case.

The verb *to wander* descends in unproblematic fashion from Old English *wandrian* and the *OED* notes such cognates as 'Old Frisian *wondria* (West Frisian *wanderje*, North Frisian *wāneri*), Middle Dutch *wanderen*, Flemish (Kilian) *wanderen*, Middle Low German *wanderen* (Low German *wandern*), Middle High German, German *wandern*, Norwegian, Swedish *vandra*, Danish *vandre* < Old Germanic **wandrōjan*. Not recorded in Old Norse or Old High German. …' (*OED* s.v. *wander*, v.; accessed 1 September, 2015). Among early Germanic forms as reconstructed by comparative philology should also be noted the related but not identical Frankish **wandjan* as brought to northern Gaul by the Franks in the sixth century. The core semantics here are 'to turn'. The Old French and more specifically Anglo-French reflexes are *gandir* and *guandir* with significations 'to turn aside, dodge, escape' (Rothwell 2005, s.v. *gandir, guandir*). For example, in the Anglo-French *Life of St. Edmund*, written by Denis Pyramus of St Edmunds Abbey in the early thirteenth century, viking raids by the sons of Ragnar Loðbróka (Hairy-Breeks) on East Anglia around 865 are presented as irresistible: 'Cil ki d'Ingar poet eschaper … A l'encontrer ne puet guandir D'Hubbe, que il n'estuet morir' (Kjellman 1935: v. 2079; 'He who could escape Ingvar … could not dodge Ubba when meeting him but must die', my translation). The same Germanic root is represented in Old English *wandian* 'to deviate, flinch, hesitate.'

Anglo-French *gandir* in the sense of deviating from a path must then have entered Middle English, although it is not recorded, and would appear both to have been assumed into the bird name and, in light of the obvious semantic affinities,

[6] Opie, Opie (1977: 191–192). The rhyme continues "Upstairs, downstairs / In my lady's chamber" and suggests that the vocalism of *gander/ wander/chamber* was once closer than at present.

to have been attracted to the semantic field of English *wander*, while retaining its distinct form. Over time the coincidence of the verb *gandir* with the bird name *gander* helped to bring the verb *wander* into association with geese (well illustrated by the quotations above), at which point folk etymology credits geese with a particular propensity to aimless circumambulation and, rather more specific to the species and based on accurate observation, with a craning of the long neck. "Ganders gander", as Old English gnomic verse might have said. On the regular pattern in English of noun formation from verbs, *gander* then achieved independent status, not as a kind of walk but as the kind of look that might occur during certain kinds of walking.

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Gawk differs from *gander* in that the act of looking is not disengaged and mildly curious but uncomprehending and incredulous. The *OED* offers the definition 'to stare or gape stupidly' (*OED* s.v. *gawk*, v.; accessed 1 July 2015). As for origin, the verb may be formed on the noun (which also doubles as a term for an unsophisticated person) or, according to the *OED* be 'possibly, on the other hand, an iterative < gaw v. (with suffix as in *tal-k*, *wal-k*, *lur-k*), in which case it may be the source of the noun'.[7] *Gaw*, now obsolete, is, in turn, stated as cognate with Old Norse *gá* 'to heed' (not exactly a sight act, it should be noted). But this derivation, however attractive, is to disregard Modern German *gucken* 'to look' and its several related forms, for which an Old High German **gukkan* or **guckan* has been reconstructed (Köbler 1993, s. vv. **gukkan*, **guckan*). An unrecorded Old English cognate is then possible. In addition to the above-noted meaning, the *English dialect dictionary* records *gawk* (var. *gouk*) with the meaning 'to wander aimlessly about' (Wright 1898–1905: 2.583, s.v. *gawk*). This reverses the situation with *gander*, which moved from locomotion to gaze. It is not etymology that is driving the evolution of these words but phonetic resemblance or suggestion, register, and topic. Something similar to the intertwined relations of Anglo-French *gandir,* and English *wander* and *gander* appears to attend *gawk*. This can be illustrated and summed up in the near-equivalence in usage of *gawky* and *awkward*. There is a linear motif here: the *gawky* or the *gawks* are often thin or tall as well as undersocialized. Like the long-necked goose gazing about, they look in vain for social cues. *Awkward* was originally an adverb on the model of *forward* and meant 'in the wrong direction, in the wrong way', before developing the modern range of meanings descriptive of situations, objects, persons. The now obsolete *awk* is traced to Old Norse *afug* (with variants) 'turned the wrong way, back foremost' and alone was used in English as 'directed the other way or in the wrong direction, back-handed, from the left hand' (*OED*; Wright 1898–1905: 2.583). Interaction between the *gawk-* and *awk-* forms explains the compounds listed in the *OED* entry for *gawk* as adjective: 'of difficult etymology; apparently a contraction of a disyllabic word which appears in many

[7] Evidence for the noun is late, and the usage may have emerged in Ireland; see the *OED* citations.

north-English dialects as *gaulick-*, *galloc-*, *gaulish-* (*hand*, *handed*)' (*OED* s.v. *gawk*, adj.; accessed 1 September 2015). The etymological matter is resolved, if we see in *gaulick* a dissimulated form of **gauk-lick*, and in *gauk-* a substitution for *awk*. In support of this explanation, *gawk-handed* is also recorded (*OED*).

In an etymological note that is part of the entry for *gawk* as adjective (and not well integrated with the treatment of *gawk* as noun or verb), the *OED* briefly entertains the possibility of a source in French *gauche* and then rejects it, a rejection supported by the other evidence here reviewed. But since *gauche* is now fully at home in English and also belongs in the sematic field of geese and gawks, brief comment is warranted. Middle French *senestre* 'left' was replaced by *gauche* in the fifteenth century. An excellent work in progress, *Dictionnaire étymologique de l'ancien français*, reviews the early evidence for *gauche*-looking words in Renaissance French dialect but is unable to determine an exact etymon (Baldinger et al. 1971–: G 387–388, s.v. *gauche*). Given the negative associations of the left, one might speculate on a tabu-related substitution of the native term by an import from an "innocuous" foreign language, on the model of Spanish *izquierdo*, from Basque.[8] A Frankish reflex of Old High German *walah*/*walask* 'alien, foreign' (cf. English *Welsh*) might have been brought to sub-Roman Gaul and could have led an underground life in French dialect before being called on to replace *senestre*, since, both foreign and referring to foreignness, it had the requisite affective value of alterity and incorrectness (Köbler 1993, s.vv. *walah*/*walask*). Certainly, the derivation is plausible in purely phonological terms (*w-* > *g-* or *gu-*; post-vocalic *-l-* vocalized as *au*; *-h* or *-sk* realized as Gallic *-che)*. In all of the foregoing, the largely pejorative affect of these words (when *goose* and *gander* are used figuratively of persons) is to be noted. In conclusion, we may recall the nursery rhyme, "Goosey goosey gander, whither shall I wander …" to illustrate the indeterminate nature and affinities – almost the secret life – of several of these terms and, more pointedly, the persistent association in English motif-clustering and speech of *goose, gander,* and *wander*, long after folk etymology had supplanted any awareness of an imported French *gandir*, another word that seems to have realized in English its inherent signification, 'to deviate'.

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To cock a snook. The *OED* explains *snook*, as used in the expression *to cock a snook*, as 'a derisive gesture' (*OED* s.v. *snook*, n.[3]; accessed 1 September, 2015). The earliest attestation is in the diary of Elizabeth Wynne Fremantle from 1791: "They *cock snooks* at one on every occasion" (Wynne 1935–40: I. 90 [7 Dec. 1791]). A more analytic statement is found in Martin Cumberland's *Murmurs in the Rue Morgue*: "With his right hand he made the somewhat coarse gesture known as 'cocking a snook'. The thumb and extended fingers, spread in front of the face, made a baffling disguise" (Cumberland 1959: 38). The *OED* calls *snook* "of obscure origin".

[8] Cf. the use of native resources in Italian *stanca* 'the tired one' and *manca* 'the lame one' for the left hand.

The word was once widespread in English dialect and Wright's dictionary offers the meanings 'to smell as a dog; to poke about with the nose, to pry about' (Wright 1898–1905: 5.591, s.v. *snook*). In Scots, however, the semantics of the verb *snoke* are richer: 'To sniff, smell, scent out, as a dog, snuff, poke with the nose; *fig*., to scorn, despise.' (*Dictionary of the Scots language* 2014, s.v. *snoke*; found as early as Gavin Douglas's translation of *The Aeneid*, 1513 [Douglas 1957–1964]). The *OED* knows the verb *to snoke* and the explanation, with one exception, is congruent with usage in Scots: 'To snuff or smell; to go snuffing or smelling (at); to poke about with the nose. Also *fig*., to sneak about, to keep watch *over*'. But here the element of derision is lacking. The *OED* suggests a Scandinavian origin for *snoke*, citing Norwegian dialect *snōka* 'to snuff, smell' but a cognate, *snaka*, 'to rummage, snuff about' is found in Old Norse (Cleasby et al. 1957, s.v. *snaka*). It then seems plausible to conclude that "to cock a snook" has a specifically Scottish origin but how was the noun *snook* and the manual gesture it implies derived from the verb?

In a separate entry, the *OED* explains *snook*, n.[1] as 'A projecting point or piece of land; a promontory'. Usage is northern and Scottish, and the term is now judged obsolete. An early example as a toponym is found in a thirteenth-century charter "In illa parte agri quæ vocatur le Snoc" (Fowler 1878: 55 [from c. 1236]). Cf. "In factura pontis castri Berwyci, muri lapidei juxta mare subtus le Snoke" (Palgrave 1837: II. 160 [from c. 1297]).

With the phrase "to turn up one's nose at something" in mind, the following development may be proposed: (1) to snoke is to deride; (2) a derisive gesture extending the nose, with perhaps very deep European roots (cf. "to give someone the fig"), becomes the manual sign expressing this feeling; (3) the extension to the nose effected by the spread hand is likened to a headland or point (*snook*, n.[1]) on the seacoast; (4) the snook (n.[3]) is cocked by the hand being spread and raised with the thumb facing backwards toward the face at nose level. The bit of word-play available in *snook* and *cock* may have dictated the choice of verb or the rear-facing thumb may have suggested a cocked firearm. Other deviations from standard public conduct are explored in the following.

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Shenanigan: Of *shenanigan*, the *OED* writes: 'trickery, skullduggery, machination, intrigue; teasing, "kidding", nonsense; (usu. *pl.*) a plot, a trick, a prank, an exhibition of high spirits, a carry-on'. The term is said to have emerged in the U.S. but, as for etymology, we find "origin obscure" (*OED* s.v. *shenanigan*; accessed 1 September, 2015). First attestations are from the mid- to late nineteenth century and support the geographical attribution. From the journalism of California: "Are you quite sure? No shenanigan?" (*Town Talk* 1855, 25 April, 2); "These facts indicate that there is some *shenanegan* going on" (*Spirit of the age* 1857: 20 April, 2C); "Race came off Whiskey Bill winner, the Mare's rider held in, and Smith pronouncing it shenanigan" (De Long 1930: 156, 15 August, 1930). And from Mark Twain: "Consider them all … guilty (of 'shenanigan') until they are

proved innocent" (Clemens 1917: May, 1862, I. iii. 77). In the following, the origin of *shenanigan* is traced to one of the immigrant communities that established itself on the American west coast.

In Irish, *sean*, regularly 'old', is also employed as an adjectival prefix to denote originality, elevated age, known habits, etc. and often carries an intensifying or deprecatory colouring, e.g., *seanaimsir* 'old times', *sean-pheacath* 'an inveterate sin', *sean-bheo* 'a grudge, old quarrel', *sean-urchóid* 'an old offense, old villainy', *seana-deich a' triuch* 'a wretched old ten of clubs', and the like (Dinneen 1927, s.v. *sean*). It is proposed that *sean* was combined with *anachain* 'harm, damage, calamity, accident' (often viewed with exasperation), to form *seananachain* (*ʃananəχaŋ*) with the meaning habitual deleterious action by a human agent or, more familiarly, someone's "old tricks". Other Hibernicisms also seem to have taken root, or at least first appeared, in the San Francisco area of the U.S. with its international port (Sayers 2002; for a recent, none too rigorous, but lively account, see Cassidy 2007).

With late-nineteenth-century London peopled by Finnegans and Flanagans, Hallorans and Houlihans, *shenanigan* would surely have had a familiar ring to the first editors of the *OED,* even if perceived as originally a term of North American slang. One can only speculate why James Murray and his colleagues did not look to John Bull's other island for a source for the term, particularly in light of its negative connotations. Even closer to home were the London *Hooligans*, a name for a street gang first recorded in 1898. Popular etymology has suggested an origin in *Hooley's Gang* or some other such misapprehension (and the *OED*'s speculation stops here) but it is also possible that the name was chosen by its bearers. *Houlihan*, seen above, originated in Irish *Ó hUallacháin*, whose basis lies in *uall-* 'pride'; negatively coloured derivatives are *uallach* 'vain, boastful', *uallachán* 'coxcomb' (Dinneen 1927, s.v. *uall-*). The street toughs may then have thought of themselves as something like "the Cocks of the Walk".[9]

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Balderdash: *Balderdash* is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as (1) froth or frothy liquid? (*obsolete*), (2) a jumbled mixture of liquors, (3) a senseless jumble of words; nonsense, trash, spoken or written (*transferred sense)*, and (4) filthy, obscene language or writing (*dialect*) (*OED* s.v. *balderdash*, n.; accessed 1 September, 2015). As for origins: "etymology unknown". Yet there is a reference to an appended note, where we read, inter alia:

> Most etymologists have … assumed 3 to be the original sense, and sought its explanation in the obvious similarity of *balder* to dial. *balder* 'to use coarse language,' Dutch *balderen* 'to roar, thunder,' Norwegian *baldra*, Icelandic *baldrast*, *ballrast* 'to make a clatter,' and of *-dash* to the vb. *dash* in various senses. The Welsh *baldorddus* adj., < *baldordd* 'idle noisy talk, chatter,' has also been adduced.

[9] On London bully boys and their speech, see Sayers (2007, 2008, 2010a and 2010b).

First sure attestations of the noun and related verb *balderdash* are from the early seventeenth century. Of these, Ben Jonson may be cited for the meaning 'mixed liquors' ("Beare, and butter-milke, mingled together… It is against my free-hold… To drinke such balder dash"; Jonson 1631: I. ii. 25) and Andrew Marvell for 'a senseless jumble of words' ("Did ever Divine rattle out such prophane Balderdash!"; Marvell 1674: ii. 243).

The Welsh evidence is of considerable interest, although the transformation of the adjective based on *balordd* 'babble, chatter, clamour' into a noun is problematic and, more generally, Welsh is not a significant source of English vocabulary in the period in question. On the other hand, at the time when *balderdash* makes its appearance, Irish and the English of Ireland was beginning to make a contribution to English and English letters.[10]

Early modern Irish *béal* 'mouth' (Old Irish *bél*) is found in numerous compounds describing the quality of speech, e.g., *béalban* 'soft, blandishing language', *béilbinn* 'sweet-mouthed', *béalgach* 'babbling, deceitful', *béalchainnteach* 'loquacious', *béalartán* 'idle prater'. Irish *diardanach* 'churlish, angry' could have combined with *béal* and have been accommodated in English as *balderdash*, initially with meaning 'coarse speech'. The earliest attestations make no suggestion that such a manner of speech is especially characteristic of the culture that supplied the term. Put more plainly, *balderdash* has none of the affect of *blarney*. The Scots Gaelic equivalent of Irish *béal* 'mouth' is *beul* [bel] and it enters into many of the same kinds of compounds and formations as seen above. *Beul* in combination *diardachd* 'angriness, surliness' would yield a model even phonetically closer to English *balderdash* than the hypothetical Irish form.

While an Irish or Scottish origin offers the most economical solution to the origin of the word *balderdash*, it is still possible that, once introduced into English, it was further influenced, at least in some quarters, by English *balder* 'to use coarse language', although the Germanic cognates of this latter word point toward true auditory effects ('roar, thunder, make a clatter'). The evolution here outlined would have offensive language at the original semantic core, with "nonsense" a subsequent, somewhat attenuated development. Among the effects of intemperate speech is astonishment on the parter of the hearer.

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[10] See Cronin (1997); histories of the English language, such as the authoritative Baugh and Cable (1993: 312–13), and Nevalainen (1999) devote some space to the English of Ireland but little attention to lexical imports from Ireland to the English of England, save for a conventional listing of five or six well known words, *brogue*, *colleen*, and the like.

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