

Wenglish? A Study of Borrowings in the Field Names of the English-Welsh Border Region

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Abstract

This paper will look at the relationship between the English and Welsh naming vocabulary on both sides of the border, with a particular focus on the hundred of Oswestry in Shropshire and the north-east of the historic county of Radnorshire in Wales. The data analysed is drawn from mid-19th-century title documents and earlier estate records held in the National Library of Wales.

The nature of language contact in these regions will be investigated in this paper through a number of in-depth element case studies, analysing commonly occurring English and Welsh borrowings and transfers. The process of element borrowing is complex and fascinating in the border areas, showing how both languages strongly influence each other sometimes regardless of their status as minority or dominant language. Each study places the element in its wider geographical context in the border region using published field name corpora in Herefordshire, Shropshire and Cheshire. The studies are supported by evidence gained by field-walking and digital presentation (ArcGIS) where data can be mapped and manipulated to produce clear and interesting distribution maps.

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Although short and snappy, the term ‘Wenglish’ does not quite describe the aims of this paper as it tends to be used to describe the dialects of English-speaking Welsh people. This paper is not about the distinction between the language of Welsh and English speakers, but about the impact of the contact between the two languages on the onomasticon in the border region. ‘Wenglish’ in the context of this paper refers to the category of place name elements which cannot be comfortably categorised as English or Welsh.

The data used for this study is a corpus of about 20,000 field names collected from the tithe records of Oswestry Hundred and Radnorshire, both situated along the national border between England and Wales. The tithe records are a comprehensive collection of mid-19th-century names collected by surveyors across the whole of England and Wales. Oswestry Hundred, in the west of Shropshire, is part of England and Radnorshire part of Wales. Radnorshire is characterised by large swathes of open land, commonly used for sheep farming, larger field enclosures, small nucleated settlements and a very small population. In comparison, Oswestry Hundred has a much larger population, the large market town of Oswestry, smaller field enclosures and a higher level of arable farming.

Throughout the post-medieval period the Welsh language was being pushed westwards into the heartland of Wales. The English language steadily took control of most domains, including the economy, education and law. Though, fortunately, this situation has begun to reverse in the last twenty or thirty years. In both Radnorshire and Oswestry Hundred

the Welsh language began to decline in the post-medieval period, though it does remain in the western upland regions in both areas. The Welsh language, however, still survives on the ground in place names and minor names in the east and west of both regions. The expected influence of the incoming dominant language, English, on the native minority language, Welsh, can be seen in minor-names and field names in borrowings such as *clos* ‘close’, *betws* ‘house of prayer, chapel of ease’ (from OE *bed-hūs*), *bonc/bank* ‘hillock, hill, rising ground, ridge, bank’ (from ME *bonk*), *parc* ‘park, field’ (from OFr *parc*, possibly through ME), *cocksut* ‘cockshoot, glade’ (from E *cockshoot*), *stabl* ‘stable’ (from ME *stable*), etc. However, the borrowings are not always from the dominant to the minor language as we also see evidence of loans and influence from the Welsh language into the English onomasticon. This paper will focus on three elements which reflect this complex relationship.

Rhos

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) states that the original sense of the word is ‘promontory, wooded upland or woodland’. The sense of promontory appears to have survived in Pembrokeshire (south-west Wales), as Charles (1992: 810) glosses the term as ‘sometimes “promontory”’. Padel (1985: 200) also explains that the ‘promontory’ sense survives in some Cornish, Welsh and Scottish place names, but that these are rare, and, in the case of the Cornish names, probably coined in the Old Cornish period or earlier. The *English Dialect Dictionary* (*EDD*) glosses English *ros(s)* as a term found in Herefordshire meaning ‘marsh’ or ‘morass’. Smith (1956: 87) derives the element from Old Welsh *ros*, referring to a moor or heath, and suggests the word may have been borrowed into Old English as an appellative, surviving as *ross* in certain dialects. The element is found in the tithe field names of Radnorshire and Oswestry. It is found in 256 names in Radnorshire and 32 in Oswestry. The element commonly appears in clusters, for example the *rhos* names, which could possibly be simplex appellatives, just north of Bwlch-y-sarnau in Radnorshire. The modern Ordnance Survey name *Bailey Bog* that can be seen on the map suggests a characteristically marshy area, suggestive of a moor or marsh rather than a promontory. The element also survives into the tithe records in the names of large swathes of moorland, for example the area still known as *Rhos Fallog*, just north-east of Llanbister village, Radnorshire.

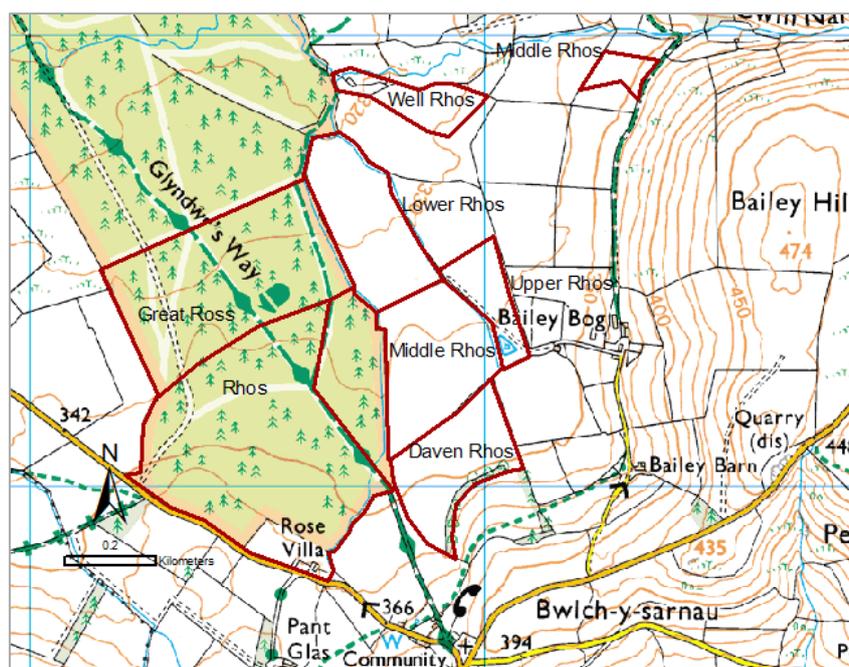


Fig. 1. Map of *Rhos* Names in Radnorshire. OS 1:25 000, Tile SO07NW, updated August 2014, Ordnance Survey, GB. Using: EDINA Digimap Ordnance Survey Service, <<http://edina.ac.uk/digimap>>, downloaded: September 2014.

In Radnorshire just under half (123) of the *rhos* names appear in English constructions, following the standard pattern of specific preceding generic, for example *Far Rhos* (Llanbadarn Fynydd, Llanfihangel Rhydithon, Llanbister), *Hay Rhos* (Llanbister), *Long Rhos* (Llanfihangel Rhydithon), *Price's Rhos* (Llanbister: Golon and Cefn-pawl townships). The rest of the names are Welsh constructions or simplex names, for example *Rhos Bach* (Llanbister: Golon and Cefn-pawl townships), *Rhos Yscybor* (Llanbadarn Fynydd), *Tynyrhos* (Llanbister). The term 'Welsh construction' refers to the common modern Celtic name structure of generic preceding specific.⁴⁹ The presence of the element in Radnorshire in both English and Welsh constructions suggests that it was active in the onomasticon of both languages at the time the names were coined. The large number of simplex instances of the element would suggest that could have been used as an appellative in the same way elements like *field* and *meadow* were used by surveyors to fill the gaps in the tithe schedules. If this is the case the element must have been very well-established in the local English dialect. In comparison, in Oswestry Hundred, *rhos* appears only in Welsh constructions. This would suggest that in this area at this time, the element was not active in the English onomasticon.

What is perhaps more interesting is what happens to the element in development. The element appears to develop an English adjectival sense in the field names of Radnorshire and Oswestry Hundred, in the form *rhossy*. The element is most commonly compounded with the English generic *meadow*, which makes sense as the lower quality marshy land would be used as grassland. The element occurs most commonly in Radnorshire, in 23 names, and possibly

⁴⁹ Taylor (2012: 168-169) and Padel (1985: xv) discuss the older Celtic compound structure of specific preceding generic in reference to Scottish and Cornish syntax respectively. Padel states that this structural reverse occurred some time from the beginning of the 5th century onwards, with Taylor suggesting c.600 AD as the approximate date.

in 2 names in Oswestry Hundred. The frequency of this element in the central borderlands suggests that it had become an established part of the naming vocabulary there.

Grug

The addition of the English adjectival ending *-y* can also be seen in the development of the borrowing E *grig* from W *grug*, meaning ‘heather’ or ‘heath’. The element *grug* was borrowed into English before 1691, the date of the first attestation recorded in the *OED* and, according to the *English Dialect Dictionary*, the English borrowing is geographically limited to Wales, Cheshire, Shropshire, Herefordshire, Cornwall, and oddly, Norfolk. In the Oswestry and Radnorshire corpus, the borrowing is only found in Oswestry Hundred. The adjective *griggy* is glossed in the *OED* and the *EDD*, though the *OED* questions its relationship with *grig* as the attestations for *griggy* pre-date those for *grig*. In Oswestry Hundred both *grig* and *griggy* are only found in English constructions, such as *Grig Field* (Selattyn), *Big Griggy Hill* (Knockin), *Griggy Leasow* (Shotatton). What is interesting to note about this borrowing is the fact that the Welsh element *grug* does not appear in the tithe field names in the same area. This could suggest that at some point the element existed in the area in both languages in order for the borrowing to occur, and that, for some reason, the element only continued to be used in its borrowed form.

Why?

A question interesting to ask and difficult to answer is: why were these elements borrowed into the English language? Owen (2013: 332) suggests that certain English elements such as *frith*, *acre*, *outrake* were taken into Welsh to describe new agrarian practices or came to replace Welsh elements, probably reflecting the process of anglicization. However, these explanations do not explain the borrowing of Welsh elements into English. Elements such as *rhos* could have been borrowed into English due to their semantic precision: although semantically similar elements like *heath* and *marsh* exist in Radnorshire and Oswestry, it could be the case that *rhos* denotes a particular type of marsh, heath or moorland – upland, sheep land perhaps. The borrowing of terminology such as this could also have something to do with the survival of earlier names. If names of large swathes of common land such as *Rhos Fallog* survive into use by a number of English farmers, it is quite conceivable that the element, known to denote moorland, could be taken into the English naming vocabulary to describe land with similar characteristics elsewhere in the area.

Dôl/dole

This element is not necessarily a borrowing, but may possibly show a relationship between English and Welsh in the region. The elements W *dôl* and E *dole* are etymologically different. Welsh *dôl* refers to ‘meadow, dale, pasture or valley’, usually beside a river and in both Radnorshire and Shropshire the Welsh element appears to be most commonly used to denote meadowlands. In comparison, English *dole* denotes a division or share of a common

field, derived from OE *dāl*. The element is commonest in Radnorshire and appears in that area in English constructions, Welsh constructions and quite a high number of simplex names (47). It could be possible that the English constructions contain the English element and the Welsh constructions contain the Welsh element, however, it seems unlikely that both elements would exist independently in the same geographical area given their almost identical phonology. It is therefore necessary to look at other characteristics of the *dôl/dole* enclosures to ascertain whether the Welsh or English meaning defines the element in this area.

A number of names containing the element in Radnorshire have been mapped, which highlights some clear patterns. The map below shows that names containing the element in Llanbister parish (Radnorshire) are commonly found along watercourses; including major rivers and smaller tributaries and streams. It would appear that the element in both English and Welsh constructions denotes land near water, suggesting that the element in this area has the Welsh meaning ‘pasture or meadow near a river’. However, this is not necessarily the case as commonly fields of ‘meadow’ or ‘pasture’ which could contain doles or strips would also normally be beside rivers or waterbodies.

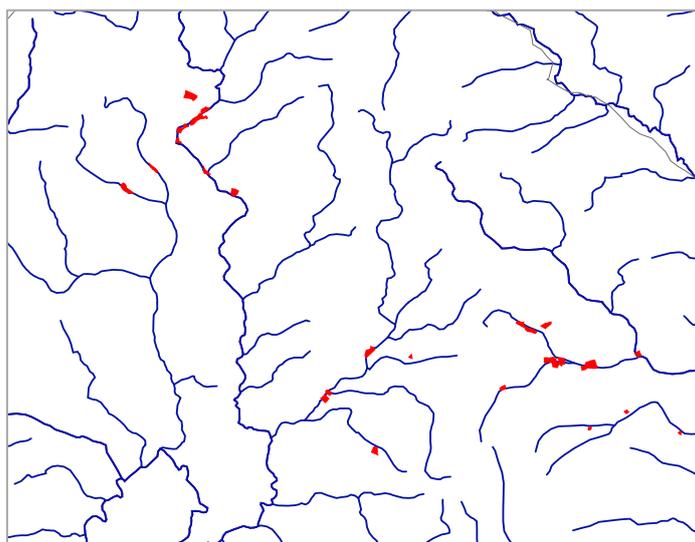


Fig. 2. *Dôl/dole* names along major watercourses in Llanbister Parish (Radnorshire), the red dots are the *dôl/dole* fields

Mapping also revealed other patterns, for example the presence of two neighbouring fields; one with the English name, *Long Dole*, and the other with the Welsh name, *Dol Owen*. It is unlikely that the English name contains the English element, whilst the neighbouring field contains the Welsh. It would seem to me that in this example, the word *dole* has been taken to mean ‘meadow’ in both cases. Furthermore, whether this is a distinctive enough characteristic or not, it is possibly significant that none of the *dôl/dole* names that have been mapped are strip-shaped fields; most of them are small, irregularly shaped enclosures. It is likely that fields with a name containing English *dole* would be more regularly shaped.

Some of the evidence suggests that the English element may be semantically influenced by the Welsh element, particularly in Radnorshire, and that both refer typically to

small enclosures of meadowland, characteristically alongside watercourses. However, to fully prove this hypothesis, it will probably be necessary to look into the past use of the land in the area – were these English *dole* fields on land that was previously open common land? This will involve finding maps and documents that pre-date parliamentary enclosure in the area. It is also interesting to consider the wider use of this element. If it refers to enclosures of meadowland in Radnorshire, is this the case in the neighbouring English parish of Herefordshire? What is the situation in the rest of Shropshire? Where is the boundary between the use of the element to denote a meadow and that used to denote a strip of common land? Hopefully some of these questions can be answered in future work.

Conclusion

These studies suggest that the contact between English and Welsh in the border region between the two countries has impacted the languages in both directions. Elements like *rhos* and *grug* have been taken into the English language in the border region and become so established that adjectival forms like *rhossy* and *griggy* are commonly found. In other cases the English onomasticon appears to have been influenced semantically by Welsh terminology and vice versa, as may be the case with *dole*, to the point where the ability to categorise elements as ‘English’ or ‘Welsh’ frequently becomes almost impossible. This work is focussed on in much greater detail in my forthcoming PhD thesis.

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