

*DAUGHTER ~ MAIDEN ~ MAIDSERVANT:*  
DYNAMICS OF SEMANTIC SHIFT FROM  
CONTINENTAL CELTIC TO INSULAR CELTIC VOCABULARY\*

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### 1. Introduction

The history of Irish language has been thoroughly explored as much as its phonology, morphology and syntax – in their transition from Old Irish to Middle Irish and to its modern state – are concerned. However, the language vocabulary has been largely ignored,<sup>1</sup> while it is the vocabulary evolution that provides the basis for the glottochronological studies, based on lexicostatistics. This is understandable, since vocabulary is the least systematic part of language and, therefore, the most challenging when one faces the task of structural description; however, lexical changes reflect changes in the society. From this viewpoint, one of the most interesting lexical-semantic groups is kinship terminology, which is normally quite distinct and compact yet having marked ways of evolution. This minor piece of our research will encompass a single sememe of ‘daughter’ in Celtic languages.

### 2. Reflexes of IE ‘daughter’ in Celtic

It has been commonly accepted that cognates of the proto-Indo-European word for ‘daughter’ (*\*dhugH* (Szemerényi 1977: 21) or *\*dhug(h<sub>2</sub>)-tər* (Mallory, Adams 2006: 472)) survive in many later languages save for Albanian, Italic and Celtic.<sup>2</sup> Its only reflex is thought to be the Old Irish *der* ‘daughter, girl’, a shortened form of the Indo-European stem surviving only in compound words (O’Brien 1956: 178), “an allegro-form” (Matasović 2009: 110). Typically, *Der-* (also found in such forms as *Dar-*, *Tar-*, *Ter-*) is the first part of a compound name in which the second part appears in a genitive form, so it may be interpreted as ‘daughter of’. However, such compounds are never used as patronymics, but rather as

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<sup>1</sup> Save for studies describing loanwords (of either Scandinavian, English or Anglo-Norman origin).

<sup>2</sup> See also, for the possible Indo-European origin of Middle Persian *duxt* ‘princess’ in (Kullanda 2002: 92), while in Mongolic the word for ‘daughter, girl, princess’ is *ökin* (Rykin 2009: 89).

proper names, such as *Derfhinn*, *Der(b)forgaill*, *Derluga*, *Daróma*, *Derfiled* etc. While most of them are commonly understood as derivations from theonyms, *Derfiled* means ‘daughter of a poet’, but, surprisingly, in Irish sources the latter name appears as belonging to males. At least two instances of male saints bearing this name are given by Donnchadh Ó Corrain and Fidelma Maguire in their book on Irish names (Ó Corrain, Maguire 1990: 71). Sometimes, however, *der-* may appear as an isolated lexeme, in such expressions as *Der gréine* (‘daughter of the Sun’, e.g. ‘dew’ (LEIA-D 53)) or alone. The ‘obscure bardic language’ yields such an example as *mór ndear .i. mór mban* ‘many *ndear*, i.e. many women’. This case makes the interpretation of semantics and etymology of *der-* more problematic. In the surviving compounds it may well be interpreted as the ‘wife of’, and *Der gréine* might be understood as the ‘solar woman’. On the other hand, Cormac mac Cuilennáin in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century glossed *der-* as *ingen* ‘girl, daughter, young woman’ (Meyer 1913: 41). Perhaps this lexeme is not unrelated to Old Irish *ander* ‘girl, young woman’, glossed in the same work by Cormac as *ander .i. ben .i. ní der .i. ní hingen* (Meyer 1913: 9), and can be translated as ‘*Ander*, i.e. a woman, i.e. not a girl (*der*), i.e. not a daughter’. Cormac’s popular etymology is improbable, since in Goidelic the Indo-European prefixal negator would consistently become *in-*, rather than *an-*, which in fact is an emphatic prefix of unclear etymology, unrelated to negation. Well-learned in Latin, Cormac, however, lacked understanding of native Celtic language structures, so his etymology, cited by Joseph Vendryes, can hardly be other than a bizarre one. Nor the parallel to Welsh *anneir* ‘heifer’, suggested by Vendryes (LEIA-A 76), seems phonetically plausible: Brittonic languages, unlike Goidelic, would not tend to assimilate consonant clusters. However, the semantic transition between ‘heifer’ and ‘girl’ is not infrequent and well attested in the Irish saga tradition. Moreover, the link between the words for ‘son/boy’ or ‘daughter/girl’ and those denoting animal youngsters is by no means uncommon, though the exact way of semantic transition cannot be identified. For instance, some Russian dialects use the word *dochka* (which the literary norm has for nothing other than ‘daughter’) for ‘young sow’ (Trubachev 2006: 57). Modern Russian slang uses *tyolka* (‘heifer’) for ‘teenage girl, young woman’. Compare also Old Irish *suth* ‘litter’, deriving from a Proto-Indo-European word for ‘son’ (LEIA-RS 205).

In the early 1970s, a Gaulish lead tablet dating back to the first century A.D. was found in Larzac, France, which added to the known vocabulary of Continental Celtic a new lexeme, *duxtir*, with the possible meaning of either ‘daughter’ or ‘female disciple, female foster-child’

(‘jeune fille initiée’, in (Lejeune 1985: 133); see also (Sims-Williams 2007: 3)). Anyway, there is little disagreement on the word’s etymology.

### 3. Gaulish *geneta* vs. Old Irish *ingen*

Maurice Lejeune’s suggestion that *duxtir* must have had a narrower sense than just ‘a girl’ is apparently supported by the fact that, in Gaulish, the broader meaning of ‘a girl, daughter (?), female person’ is normally represented by derivations from another IE stem, \**ĝenh*<sub>1</sub> ‘to generate’ (IEW 373 ff.): *geneta*, *genata*, *gnetā*, *nata* (Delamarre 2003: 177, 181); compare also Oscan *genetaī* ‘daughter’.

This lexeme is an adjectival of IE \**ĝenh*<sub>1</sub>-*t-ā* (\**ĝen-* ‘to bear, generate’, (Matasović 2009, 157)), formed by the *-t-* affix and, in Gaulish, well-attested also in the masculine form, both in personal names (*Meddugnatus*, *Eposo-gnatus* etc.) and separately, with a probable meaning of ‘boy’ or ‘son’. A closer look at Gaulish inscriptions brings us to a stunning conclusion: the use of the feminine form is limited to a single particular kind of source, that is, inscriptions on loom-weights (for more on this class of archaeological objects, see (RIG 317)). Loom-weights were specifically feminine attributes, and the tradition of inscribing them with playful phrases, as well as the whole epigraphic tradition of Gaul, dates back to the late Roman Empire. Loom-weight inscriptions are also not uncommon among archaeological finds from Medieval Scandinavia and Russia. This kind of finds with Latin inscriptions occurs as commonly in Gaul as in late Rome, and, just as commonly, they bear a word with a meaning of ‘female person’. Here are some examples: SALVE TU, PUELLA; AVE DOMINA; SALVE, DOMINA; SALVE SOSOR; AVE VALE BELLA TV (RIG 318). Compare some Gaulish parallels (numbering after RIG, translation being conjectural):

L-112: NATA VIMPI / CVRMI DA ‘*lovely girl, give me beer*’

L-114: GENETA / VIS CARA ‘*girl, be sweet*’

L-115: M (N?) ATTA DAGOMTA / BALINE E NATA  
‘*girl good... girl*’

L-119: MONI GNATA GABI / BVDDVTTON IMON  
‘*come girl, take my small...*’

L-120 : GENETTA IMI / DAGA VIMPI ‘*I am [a] girl good lovely*’

While the exact meaning of the word is unknown, both Latin parallels and the very nature of inscription suggest ‘girl’ rather than ‘daughter’.

Its insular cognates are Welsh *geneth* (for ‘girl’, while *merch* [< Old Celtic \**merkka*] was used for ‘daughter’) and Old Irish *gen* ‘girl, young woman’ (a rare word found in glosses only; see DIL, s.v. *gen* 2).

For Welsh *geneth*, the general rule of spirantisation in auslaut allows us to restore its Proto-British form *\*genettā* with a secondary gemination which might have been of expressive nature (Morris Jones 1913: 133).

The Old Irish word *ingen* ‘1. girl; 2. daughter’ could possibly be a secondary formation based on the same stem *\*gen-*; however, in Middle Irish *ingen*<sub>1</sub> (for ‘girl’) was superseded by another word of unclear etymology, *cailín* (see below). Of *ingen*, Cormac mac Cuileinnáin (see above) wrote what is consistent with this kind of etymology:

*Ingen .i. in-gin .i. nī ginither ūaithe. Nō in-gen .i. nī bean. Gune graece, mulier latine* [Meyer 1913, # 773]  
 ‘**Ingen**, i.e., non-procreative, or **in-gen** ‘not woman’. [‘Woman’ is] **Gune** in Greek, **mulier** in Latin.’

The word *ingen* (Middle Irish *iníon* ‘daughter’, Modern Irish *Ní* of patronymics and family names) is first recorded, as *INIGENA*, in the inscription, what Kenneth Jackson describes as “a bilingual puzzle” (Jackson 1953: 185). However, Damian McManus is more cautious, saying that “the relationship between the Ogam and Latin is unclear” (McManus 1997: 61). Let us invoke CIIC # 362 inscription from Wales:

*AVITORIA FILIA CVNIGNI – AVITTORIGES INIGENA CUNIGNI* (or: *INIGENA CUNIGNI AVITTORIGES*)

Arguably, the grammatical discrepancy between Irish *Avitoriges* (m. gen.) and Latin *Autoria* (f. nom.) does not disprove the bilingual nature of the inscription, but rather reflects an attempt of an intercultural exchange – that is, an imitation of the Roman *praenomen-nomen-cognomen* model of naming, created by a Goidel (or perhaps a Britton) and written down in Ogham. It could mean that *Avitoria* is both a daughter of a certain *Avitorix* (like the name *Tullia* that indicates being a daughter of Marcus Tullius) and a member of the *Cunigni* family. Compare another Latin inscription from the Roman Britain:

*Dis M(anibus) / Verecu(n)d(a) Rufi filia cives / Dobunna annor(um) XXXV....*  
 ‘To the spirits of the departed: Verecunda, daughter of Rufus, **tribeswoman** of the Dobunni, aged 35’ (RIB 621, see (Raybould, Sims-Williams 2007: 90)).

In this context, it is not unlikely that the word *INIGENA* in the Ogham text, seemingly matched by *filia* of the Latin counterpart, is in fact

supposed to mean *filia cives* ‘native (female) person’. Moreover, we might suggest that the Irish word, rather than deriving from Old Celtic *\*eni-genā* ‘born into a family’ (compare Gaulish *Enigenus* (Evans 1967: 206)), is an early loanword from Latin and derives from *indigena* ‘native/ local (female) person’. This suggestion is supported by the phonetic form of the word. According to Jackson, the vowel affection  $\check{e} > \check{i}$  (‘raising’ caused by the *i* of the next syllable) did not occur until the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century, so it postdates the apocope of the late 5<sup>th</sup> century. Yet the inscription is basically of pre-apocope character, which suggests that the native form should have been *\*ENIGENA*. However, dating Ogham inscriptions may be difficult because of the deliberate archaisation employed by its carvers (often in consistent and sophisticated manner). Anyway, in Goidelic, this lexeme seems to have superseded the old IE term for ‘daughter’. Before the Middle Irish period, it bore a broader sense of ‘daughter, girl, young woman’. Compare Welsh *merch* (< *\*merio-* ‘junger Mann’, with the -g formant and an emphatic gemination, a Lithuanian cognate being *mergà* ‘girl, maidservant’ (IEW 738-39)).

#### 4. Lost/loan kinship terminology

The suggestion that the Goidelic term for ‘daughter’ could have been a loanword may be supported by the Uralic data. For instance, in Sami the lexeme for ‘daughter’ is a loanword from early Baltic *\*tektāre*; in Finnish and Estonian, the same word seems to be of Scandinavian origin (*tyttär*, compare Swedish *dottir*). The original proto-form for ‘daughter’ cannot be reconstructed either in Uralic or in Altaic (Koivulehto 2007 241; Sammallahti 2007 404; Rykin 2009).

What could have caused the loss of the IE term for ‘daughter’ in Insular Celtic, given that, as the existence of differing lexemes suggests, it happened independently in different languages and cannot be traced back to a single linguistic event (unlike the loss of the IE word for ‘son’ which in Proto-Celtic was *\*mak<sup>w</sup>k<sup>w</sup>-os* and whose etymology is problematic)?

Arguably, the simultaneous loss of the IE word for ‘daughter’ in more than one of the Insular Celtic languages may be explained through the fact that the Irish and the Britons had a special institution of fosterage (Old Irish *altramm*) – prominent families would send their children to foster-parents, which meant raising their social status. The ‘baby language’ words *aite* and *muimme* would then acquire the corresponding meanings of ‘foster father’ and ‘foster mother’ (“the intimate forms have been transferred to the fosterparents” (Kelly 1988: 86)); compare, however, Welsh *mam* ‘mother, Mom’ and *tad* ‘father, Dad’. At the same time, in modern Irish dialects (in colloquial speech), the Old Irish word

for ‘foster child’ (*dalta*) may be used for addressing one’s biological child.

On the other hand, the insular Celtic loss of the IE lexemes for ‘daughter’ and ‘son’ may be regarded as fitting into the pattern of the ‘linguistic revolution’ which took place between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. and must have had social origins – perhaps related to the conversion to Christianity. Namely, social changes caused shifts in the meanings of social terms; however, these shifts are consistent with the patterns widely observed in other languages. The semantic transition between ‘girl – daughter – maidservant’ (or between ‘boy – son – male servant’) is a frequent if not universal phenomenon well-attested in many languages (Zalizniak 2008). It is most obvious in English where *maid* still retains a more archaic meaning of ‘girl’, used in poetry as recently as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (from Saxon *mægden* ‘girl, maidservant’; compare modern German *Mädchen* ‘girl’, derived from the same stem); *boy* has also an immediate meaning of ‘male servant’ (just as *garçon* in French). In Latin, *puella* stands for both ‘girl’ and ‘daughter’, while *puer* for ‘child/boy’ and ‘servant’. Czech *děvice* and Polish *dziewa* mean ‘girl’, but their Sorbian cognate *džowka* means ‘daughter’; Czech *naše holka* means literally ‘our girl’ but is in fact used for ‘daughter’; in informal Russian, *devochka* (‘girl’) may also be used for ‘daughter’, as an intimate form, and in colloquial Russian, *dochka* (the diminutive form of the word for ‘daughter’) is used for ‘girl’ as a form of address (by older people) (Trubachev 2006: 56). Notably, this semantic process is bilateral, yet the very shift occurs within a single shared semantic field, without transgressing certain boundaries.

### 5. ‘Girl’ ↔ ‘maid-servant’ as a universal semantic shifting

Later, in the Middle Irish period, the further changes of the social structure caused changes in age-sex group stratification, which left some semantic niches empty, so that the gaps called for filling in. Thus, if in earlier Irish the word *ingen* could mean either ‘daughter’, ‘girl’ or ‘young woman’, in Middle Irish it only retained the first meaning of ‘daughter’, while another word for ‘girl’, *cailín*, emerged. Originally, *cailín* could have probably meant ‘maidservant’; morphologically, it is a diminutive of the archaic word *caile*. The latter is masculine and of unclear etymology (LEIA-C 12). This is the way Cormac glossed it:

*Caile do chaillig coimēta tighe is ainm* (Meyer 1913, # 243)  
*Caile* comes from *caillech* [‘old woman’], as a home warden.

While my earlier suggestion was linking *cailín* to Georgian *kal-* ‘woman’, *kale* ‘girl’, or Turkic *\*kalin* ‘daughter-in-law’ (Mikhailova 2007: 58), now I am inclined to dismiss this idea as speculation. My present (and perhaps just as speculative) etymology links this word (instead of linking it to *caillech* ‘old woman’ < Latin *pallium* ‘cloak’) to Old Irish *cailech* ‘cup’ (< Latin *calyx* ‘cup’). *Cailín* might be a back-formation from *cailech* understood as an adjective (*cail-ech*), ‘object related to maidservants’. The diminutive suffix could have been added later. This is not an uncommon way of how folk etymology works: compare *suckl-ed* < *suckle* < *suckling*, understood as *suckl-ing*, a gerund (in fact, *suck-ling*, a noun with an archaic diminutive suffix). However, this etymology may only be hypothetical.

While Mallory and Adams have suggested, with some uncertainty, that the Proto-Indo-European word for ‘daughter’, *\*dhuǵ(h<sub>2</sub>)-tər*, came from *\*dhug-* ‘food’ (therefore, ‘daughter’ = ‘the one who cooks’ (Mallory and Adams 1997: 148), such kind of semantic transition looks uncommon. More typical is a reverse transition (*boy* ‘male child’ → *boy* ‘male servant’, *maid* ‘girl’ → *maid* ‘female servant’), attested in many languages (see above). Apparently, the meaning of ‘(unskilled) servant’ or ‘aid’ is secondary and rooted in social reality: unskilled jobs were performed by adolescents, although the exact ways of semantic transition may have been more complicated – compare Russian words *rab* ‘slave’, *roba* ‘female slave’ [archaic], *rebyonok* (dialect *robyonok*) ‘child’, all of them deriving from Proto-Slavonic *\*orb-* ‘feeble’, ‘having no rights’ (Chernykh 1994: 91, 102). There are also African examples of semantic derivation linked to age-sex groups, of which V. A. Popov wrote:

A well-known phenomenon that seems to be universal throughout social history is the extension of terms, originally meaning either children or uninitiated young people, to indicate lower-class people (slaves or other subordinates). So, as may be expected, in Akan languages the meaning of *abofra* ‘child’ shifts to ‘servant, subordinate’, *akoa* (another term for ‘child’) to ‘slave, servant’, *abaawa* (‘young woman’) to ‘maidservant’, *abasimma* (also ‘young woman’) to ‘of lower class’ etc. (my trans., Popov 1981: 95).

Nevertheless, however frequent these transitions were, they cannot be called truly universal. In Old Irish, a corresponding semantic transition

occurred in the use of the word *gilla* whose original<sup>3</sup> meaning was probably ‘a male adolescent at the age when he first gets a weapon’ (DIL), and this polysemy had survived until much later (Dinneen 1927: 536).

Given that Old Irish *cail* ‘maidservant’, from which the diminutive form *cailín* derives, cannot be reliably traced back to any Indo-European stem, it is not implausible that this word comes from non-Indo-European substrate, which allows reconstructing a possibly more complex way of its semantic evolution: the original word from the pre-Celtic substrate vocabulary could mean ‘girl’ and then shift to ‘maidservant’ – so it is at the latter stage that it was borrowed into Old Irish. Parallels are found in modern Russian which borrowed the French word *garçon* (both ‘male child’ and ‘waiter’) to indicate ‘waiter’ only, and the English word *boy* which in Russian narrowed to ‘male native servant in former British colonies’ (the meaning now near-obsolete in English); compare also the Germanism *Mädchen Zimmer* used in the jargon of the old St. Petersburg for ‘a small room next to the kitchen, housing (female) servants’. However, the use of these loanwords in Russian is very limited (if not obsolete), and further or broader semantic evolution did not happen.

In Welsh, the semantic shift marking the divergence of ‘girl’ and ‘daughter’ must have happened earlier, or it may be the case that the extant Welsh records date from much later period, since the words *merch* and *geneth* found in surviving Middle Welsh texts do not seem to be semantically competing. Compare, however, the translation of Welsh *merch* (found in a 16<sup>th</sup>-century text) as *maid* by Morris Jones:

*Llyfr Ofydd a fydd i ferch*

‘The *maid* shall have a book of Ovid’ (Morris Jones 1913: 170)

Neither of these lexemes is attested in Old Welsh. Interestingly, at the same time (presumably, about the 16<sup>th</sup> century) Old Irish *macc*, from a broader meaning of ‘son, boy, child’, changes to a narrower one of ‘son’, while the resulting semantic gap is filled in with the word *buachaill* (Breton *bugel* ‘child’), derived from Old Irish *bó caill*, literally ‘cow-servant’, i.e. ‘cowboy’. That is, another uncommon semantic shift within the same frame, from ‘servant’ to ‘child’, occurs. Welsh, where the need for a specification term for ‘male child’ had also arisen (the older polysemantic term *map* being attested in a variety of meanings as early as

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, there is little certainty as to which of the meanings was the earlier one. In the extant written records, the meaning of ‘servant’ is more frequent. One may deduce that the compilers of Irish dictionaries tend to mark it as ‘derivation’ automatically, by analogy with the more common type of semantic shift. Presumably, this question needs further research, especially on the word’s etymology which is presently unclear.



in Middle Welsh),<sup>4</sup> used another way of semantic derivation, forming the word *bachgen* ‘boy’ from *bach* ‘little’. The same way of semantic transition is clearly seen in modern Russian *mal’chik* ‘boy’, derived from the Old Russian adjective *mal* ‘little [masculine form]’ (now occurring as a root, rather than an independent word, but retaining the meaning of ‘little’).

Anyway, the shift within a semantic field mirrors social changes, in this particular case – changes of the idea of age-sex group stratification.

## 6. As a conclusion: The way forward

It seems promising to broaden the context of this research endeavour by adding the notions of ‘cub’ and ‘small creature’ and by drawing parallels from other languages, perhaps even other than Indo-European. On the other hand, the apparent and potentially productive challenge is tracing the diachrony of the ‘child’ concept in Irish and Welsh, observing how vocabularies subtly change within an integral semantic field and how they reflect social changes such as those of age-sex group stratification.

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## Abbreviations

**CIIC** – Macalister, R.A.S., ed., 1945, *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum*, Dublin: Genprint, vol. I.

**DIL** – *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, Dublin: RIA, 1913-

**IEW** – Pokorny, J., 1959, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Bern, München: Francke Verlag.

**LEIA** – *Lexique étymologique de l’irlandais ancien de J. Vendryes* (A – Paris, CNRS, 1959, repr. Dublin : DIAS, 1981; R,S – Paris, CNRS, 1974; C - E.Bachellery et P.-Y.Lambert – Paris, DIAS-CNRS, 1987; D – P.Y.Lambert. Paris, DIAS-CNRS, 1996).

**RIB** – Collingwood, R.G., Wright, R.P., eds., 1995, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain, I, Inscriptions on Stone*, Stroud: Sutton.

**RIG** – Lambert, P.Y., ed., 2002, *Recueil des Inscriptions Gauloises*, vol. II, f. 2. *Textes Gallo-Latins sur instrumentum*, Paris: CNRS.

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<sup>4</sup> For corresponding examples, see (Mikhailova 2007a: 14).

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