

Introduction to celtic influence in english language history essay



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The relationship between the Insular Celts and the Anglo-Saxons begins in the mid-fifth century AD with the arrival of Anglo-Saxons in the British Isles. Prior to that, Britain was ruled by the Romans for almost four centuries. In the early part of the fifth century, Romans had left Britain leaving behind a country that had no strong administrative centre which led to an overall state of confusion.

The Anglo-Saxons were actually first invited by the Britons as allies against foreign raiders such as the Picts of Scotland and the Scots. However this alliance was short lived and it was not long before the Anglo-Saxons rebelled against their hosts which led to series of hostilities over the next few centuries. Eventually, the Britons were defeated by Anglo-Saxons who asserted their rule over most of the British Isles.

No contemporary written records of the Anglo-Saxon invasion exist, so the scholars had to rely on later sources in order to get information on this period. The most influential textual sources available in this context include the *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae* (written in approx. 500 AD) and the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (written in approx. 731 AD). From these texts it can be gathered that the incoming Anglo-Saxons basically performed an ethnic-cleansing by either killing the Britons or driving them over the sea. Until the appearance of new theories and archeological findings during the 1980s these descriptions of Saxon conquest were taken for granted so that the theory of complete extermination or expulsion of the Celtic people was more or less accepted by all scholars.

Although there were also some written sources which indicated that a considerable number of Britons survived the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, these sources were for the most part ignored as they did not fit in with the widely accepted traditional model of ‘expulsion and extermination’ (or the ‘double-X theory’ as it is also called). However, it is also quite possible that this question may have been ignored consciously up to an extent, since language and nationality are closely tied together and any changes in this context could have far reaching implications in the English society.

It is only in the last century that a major change in the scientific assessment of the *Adventus Saxonum* occurred following which it is now believed that a large portion of the population of Britain continued to live alongside the Anglo-Saxon conquerors. The new scientific assessment was largely based on the few textual sources describing the events, and more importantly, on improvements in archaeological methods as well as a critical reassessment of other available data.

Accordingly, the scientific consensus shifted from the ‘double-X theory’ to so called ‘elite replacement’ theories by which it is believed that the Anglo-Saxons simply took over the Post-Roman society ‘from the top’ in a form of elite take-over. In other words, the Anglo-Saxons replaced the leading structures within the Celtic populace with their own which was then slowly followed by cultural assimilation of the Celtic people in the following centuries. Today a general consensus on the matter is available by which it is believed that the Britons have constituted a distinguishable ethnic identity until the 10th century. In 2002, Markku Filppula comments on the new

scientific developments:

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“ It seems safe to conclude that the last decade or so has seen us enter a new phase in the history of research on the early Celtic-English contacts: a substantial amount of new research has been undertaken, or is under way, on a wide range of problems covering the general historical and archaeological background to these contacts and the linguistic outcomes in all domains of language.”

As we move forward in history after the period of assimilation of Celtic people, we can find much more documentation on the new contacts of English and Celtic languages so there are not as many controversies or debates in this particular context. There continued to be considerable British military opposition to the Saxons though in these periods. Wales was the longest to hold out and it only came under English control in year 1282 (this is one of the main reasons why Welsh is still the most widely used surviving Celtic language).

The Anglo-Saxon aristocracy came to an end in year 1066 with the event of Norman invasion of England. However the Irish language in Ireland and Scottish Gaelic in Scotland survived this invasion. These languages came into stronger contact with English afterwards when England brought them under its control. At that point the English language was effectively established in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Cornwall. The subsequent Anglicization of these countries had a huge effect on these areas, which led to forming of several new types of English that are today called Celtic Englishes since they display obvious influences of the original languages of the areas.

Of the other events which occurred in the British history, it is important to note the arrival of the Vikings. In the eighth century, Viking raiders and settlers had begun to arrive on English shores which later led to the establishment of the Danelaw, i. e. an area consisting of roughly half of England under the control of the Vikings. The Viking rule lasted for two centuries after which the English re-established their rule in these areas. This period is particularly important since there are frequent situations today where debates are being held on whether a specific feature of English language may be attributed to a Celtic influence or Old Norse language which was spoken in the Danelaw.

In the most recent history, i. e. in the last couple of centuries, economic and social pressure led to mass exodus of Celtic people into all parts of the World, particularly after the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent social upheaval. Very large numbers of the populations of the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are comprised of people with Celtic origins, i. e. whose ancestors were from Great Britain, Ireland, Brittany and the Isle of Man.

Today, the Celtic culture remains most evident in six nations which are commonly associated with a modern Celtic identity. These include, Brittany, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Isle of Man.

2. 3 New Archaeological Findings

An important part of studying Celtic influence on English is played by archeological findings. Until the new reassessments on this matter which took place in the 1980s, the archaeological research of early Anglo-Saxon

period was seemingly focused on finding proof for the historical facts which were documented in written sources rather than performing an independent research. Härke notes that “ a circulus vitiosus[5] was established in which the disciplines confirmed one another by adopting each other’s results as underlying assumptions for their own work” (Härke 2003: 2).

However, in recent times new evidence has come to light which shows an increasing possibility of deeper involvement of Celtic languages in development of English. Some of this evidence is listed here.

In her 1999 paper, Hildegard Tristram notes that the archeological findings from the Adventus Saxonum period portray a number of different settlement patterns in various areas of Britain which can be linked to Celtic or Anglo-Saxon origins. For example, the types of settlements discovered include kinship settlements, settlements by male war-bands, settlements of individuals and their followers etc. Additionally, distinct variations in settlement densities of these settlements have been noted. The South-East of Britain was settled most densely by the Anglo-Saxons, whereas their presence in the North and the West of the island was lowest which is indicative of a Celtic presence in these areas. Some more evidence for cultural continuity of the Celtic people is seen in the fact that there seems to have been no change in the pattern of land ownership after the coming of the Anglo-Saxons which would further imply that the Celtic people continued to live on for a period of time after the Anglo-Saxon conquest. Summarizing her paper, Tristram argues that “ the archaeological evidence can be interpreted at its simplest as showing a smooth assimilation of the two cultures” (Tristram 1999: 12).

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Another way of deriving information on the social structure of early Anglo-Saxon England is by comparing the burial sites. One of the common indicators of status differences in the past societies is the amount and value of goods found in graves. In the Anglo-Saxon archaeology, the quantities of contents found in graves varied but apparently in relation to the ethnicity of the buried.

For example, until the seventh century there were two different groups of male burials that could be distinguished. One group, which consisted of approximately 47% of grown men, is buried with weapons while the remainder is buried without. By examining the graves and skeletons it was concluded that only the Anglo-Saxon immigrants and their descendants were buried with weapons, while the native Britons were mostly buried without them. This distinction in burial sites ceases to be visible only towards the 7th century, which further means that by that time a large scale assimilation of the Celtic people had been completed. Certain large burial sites also exhibit a discontinuity in physical appearance, which indicates a replacement of native inhabitants in that particular area. In some other sites, evidence is available which points to the possibility of two separate populations living alongside each other, but with no intermarrying.

The exact numbers for immigrant and native populations are still under debate, however since new evidence is coming from all areas of archaeology (for example the analyses for the amount of forest regrowth after the Roman occupation, analyses of graves etc.) it is expected that these figures should have a satisfactory level of accuracy in the near future. Heinrich Härke cites recent estimates for the Romano-British population as ranging between 2
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and 4 million inhabitants. He points out that there is “ less clear, but still persuasive, evidence of substantial survival of a large native population”.

2. 4 Genetic Analyses

Some more evidence which argues for the Celtic case has become available in the form of genetic analyses. Recent researches of Y-chromosome distribution indicate that the Anglo-Saxon contribution to the modern English gene-pool lies between 50% and 100%. If this kind of influence were to be explained only with mass immigration and not any other parameters, scholars have estimated that there had to occur an influx of approx. 500,000 people into Britain. However, since no movement of this scale is recorded in the archaeological data, some alternative models have been created which would explain the modern genetic distribution. One of these is given by Thomason:

“ an alternative explanation would be provided by an apartheid-like situation [...] in which elevated social and economic status grant higher reproductive success to the immigrants when compared to the native population and a degree of postmigration reproductive isolation is maintained among ethnic groups for several generations”.

There is also a concrete evidence for such a division of Anglo-Saxon social structure along ethnic lines. For example, in the Laws of Ine we can find significant differences in legal status that have been assigned to Britons and Anglo-Saxons respectively. Thomason notes that Anglo-Saxons may have most likely imposed an apartheid-like social structure as a means of securing

political and military control. Otherwise they would have faced a risk of power loss and subsequent cultural assimilation into the Celtic people.

The above model also provides an explanation for the long period of skeletal distinctiveness since in an apartheid-like system a high degree of intermarriage between the incomers and the natives is not expected. This distinction continues to occur at least until the seventh century, when it is estimated that the Celtic people assimilated physical features of the Anglo-Saxons causing the two groups to become archaeologically indistinguishable. Written sources also add to this fact. For example, no further evidence of any ethnic distinctions can be found in the Laws of Alfred the Great (written in approx. 890 AD). Based on all these facts, Thomas et al. assume a maximum of fifteen generations of ethnic division after the coming of the Saxons.

2. 4 Conclusion on Historical Background

Overall, in regard to the question of Celtic survival of *Adventus Saxonum*, the historical evidence now favors the possibility of an 'elite-transmission' during the Anglo-Saxon conquest and the subsequent cultural assimilation rather than a 'clean sweep' theory as assumed previously (and in fact still believed by a number of scholars). Several works showed "that the nineteenth century 'Anglo-Saxonist' ideology of the Germanic racial 'purity' of the Anglo-Saxon society cannot be maintained in the light of recent archaeological research" (Tristram 2004: 100). Härke also notes that the political involvement in the question of racial purity played a major role and had in fact prohibited the notion of a Celtic element in the English population.

This kind of political involvement also reflected further on British attitudes towards the Celtic Englishes (which were typically seen as impeding economic progress in the Celtic areas). While the Celtic languages were sometimes admitted to hold a certain aesthetic value, the overall attitude in the English society towards them remained negative. Therefore, the prevailing mood of Anglo-Saxonism continued to influence not only the way in which archeological data and sources were interpreted, but also the direction of research. This can account for the rather late emergence of discussion on the possibility of any Celtic influence on the English language.

Provided that the new theories are proven correct, then there are several centuries of language contact and interferences that still need to be accounted for by researchers. Even now, there are several areas of English language in which researchers have identified a great likelihood of a Celtic influence and these will be discussed in the next chapter.

3. Language Contacts

During the evolution from Old English to Modern English, a number of changes have taken place. The English language has changed in its phonology, lexis and a number of morphosyntactic features. More significantly, it has even changed its type from a synthetic language[6] to becoming largely analytical[7].

The traditional explanation for this drastic change is attributed to language-internal developments and additionally to some external influence coming from the Norse languages which were spoken in the Danelaw. A new approach suggests that the reason for the high level of analyticity in English

is its contact with the Celtic languages. This theory is mainly based on the fact that English and Welsh share a common development from synthetic to analytic, which sets them both apart from the other members of their languages families (where such a development is not evident).

There are several specific grammatical areas in which this change and Celtic influence becomes evident. Due to limited scope of this work only one such feature will be described while others will be short listed.

3. 1 Contact Interferences

One of the features of English that is commonly mentioned as a possible candidate for contact interference with Celtic languages is the Cleft sentence. Although the focus of sentences in English usually comes in the end of the sentence, the language also allows almost all sentence elements to be fronted. This is usually done for added emphasis. The element to be focused upon is moved to the front, preceded by a conjugated form of ' to be'. The earliest examples for this construction come from Old English.

(1) Hit was se Halend te hyne halende.

(2) It was the saviour who healed him.

Another example is provided by Tristram who defines clefting as the fronting of an element to become a nominal complement of the copula clause. The rest of the proposition then follows as a relative clause (Tristram 2002: 256):

(4) (ys) mi a'e eirch (Evans 1964: 140f)

'(it is) I who ask for her'

In the Old English the cleft construction was quite rare but it became more frequent in Middle English. Towards the beginning of the modern period however, it developed into an established feature. The traditional explanation for the rise of clefting in English describes this as a “ reflex on the increasing rigidity of word order, stating that it is a particularly robust feature of languages with fixed word order systems”. Some scholars have proposed that there may have also been a French influence on the English emergence of this feature. This however is discarded by Filppula since earliest appearance of this feature in English predates the French ones by several centuries.

If we take a closer look at Celtic languages we can see that clefting is already a common feature in the earliest Old Irish texts, dating from the 8th century, for example:

(3) is combat maithi coiscitir

‘ it is so that they may be good (that) they are corrected’ (Thurneysen 1980: 492)

Looking at the evidence in a small number of surviving texts in Old Welsh as well, it becomes clear that clefting is a feature which is inherent in Brittonic languages from early on.

Clefting is however not as frequent in non-Celtic regional English dialects and educated spoken English. Taking everything into account, it becomes clear that clefting is better developed functionally and has higher frequencies of use in those dialects of English which have had the closest contacts with

Celtic languages. Additionally, a look at a wider European context also reveals that cleft constructions are not found only in English and the Celtic languages, but also in French, Portuguese, Danish and Swedish which are some other languages that contain a certain dose of Celtic influence.

Concerning this distribution of the cleft construction, Tristram remarks that “ it is well worth noting that it is not a feature limited to English and probably not original to English” (Tristram 2002: 267). Filppula et al. conclude that the existing variations in the distribution of cleft constructions in English dialects are indicative of at least a certain degree of influences from the Celtic languages. However, they do not see them as the single cause, stressing that “ any Celtic influences on clefting in English have only reinforced an already existing pattern”.

There are several other prominent linguistic features which have most likely found their way into English language from Celtic origins. While in most cases there is no definitive conclusion on origins of any of these features, most of them have varying degrees of probability of having come from Celtic and altogether they form a strong case for such influence. Here is an example of a few such features:

The Northern Subject Rule (NSR) – The NSR dictates that all verbs in the present tense take the 3rd person singular form unless they are directly adjacent to a pronominal subject as in the following examples from Ihalainen (1994: 221):

(18) They peel them and boils them.

(19) Birds sings.

No general agreement as to the origin of NSR has been reached yet. While the traditional explanation sees the NSR as language internal development to resolve ambiguity, it has recently been pointed out as a possible case of syntactic transfer from Brittonic.

External vs. Internal Possessors – The one feature in which the English language differs significantly from the other West Germanic languages is its possessor construction. Modern English uses noun phrase internal genitival possessors unlike for example German, where an external possessor with the effected possessor expressed with a sympathetic dative is used. Again, several arguments tie this ‘behavior’ to Celtic origins.

Periphrastic construction with do – This feature of English is commonly mentioned as a possible candidate for contact interference with Celtic languages. Although it is unlikely that there will ever be sufficient direct evidence to prove any one theory on the origins of English periphrastic do, there is enough evidence to conclude that Brythonic influence is one of the factors that must be taken into account in any discussion on the origins of English periphrastic do.

The definite article – Late British used the indeclinable definite article *ir* to express definiteness of noun phrases, late Old English used *Æ*/*the*, thus, according to Tristram “the indeclinable form very much looks like a calque[8]from Late British usurped from native material” (Tristram 2002b: 136).

Genitival groups – Another feature where the modern English language differs significantly from its Germanic cousins is in construction of group genitives, where the genitive marker is placed at the end of a noun phrase instead of the actual possessor noun as in:

(59) He married the king of England’s daughter. (Allen 1997: 112)

Pronouns – In their 2002 paper, Filppula et al. draw attention to a possible Celtic influence on the pronoun system of English. They note the phonetic similarity of the Old Irish and Manx forms of the personal pronoun in the 3rd person singular feminine, *si* / *â*« *i*: / to the Modern English *she*. They assume that this feature was then spread via the Norse settlers in the North which would account for its first attestations in Northern texts (Filppula et al. 2002: 16f).

Preposition stranding – The English prepositions usually come before their complements, however there are cases where the preposition is left stranded at the end of the sentence (hence preposition stranding).

(65) Main clause: We sat down on the rock.

(66) Relative clause: the rock we sat down on (Isaac 2003: 47)

This kind of construction is also seen in Welsh, which again makes it a candidate for possible language contact interference. Tristram provides an example:

(67) Main clause: Eisteddon ni ar y garreg. (Isaac 2003: 48) sat. 1stPI we on the rock

(68) Relative clause: y garreg eisteddon ni arni (Isaac 2003: 48) the rock sat. 1stPI we on-her

Yet another area where Celtic influences may be evident is Phonology but here too we meet with various opposing views. Not much has been written on contact effects in this particular domain which is attributed to the fact that scholars did not see any significant phonological changes in Old English or in later stages of English which could have been derived through contacts with the Celtic languages. However in recent times, more research has been performed on origins of interdental fricatives and the retroflex /r/ in Present Day English and the results again mostly point towards a Celtic influence.

4. Celtic Loanwords

According to most recent studies a variety of Celtic loanwords were a part of the English vocabulary at least for some time. These loanwords have been entering into English language in a few different phases starting with the contact between Germanic and Celtic languages during the Bronze and Iron Ages. Over time many of these have been expunged from English but some have survived.

With the arrival of the Saxons we see a number of British words which are introduced into the Old English:

milpæþ

wered

trem

trum

wassenas

lorh

syrce

hreol

deor

clædur

truma

wann

It is notable that a large number of British loanwords were from the semantic field of military and warfare, however very few of these have found their way into the Present Day English. Examples of such words that are still in use today include ass, bin, crag, coombe and hog.

Moving forward into the Middle English period, we find several words with Welsh and Cornish origin:

corgi

cromlech

cwm

gwyniad,

flannel

crag

pendragon

coracle

coracle

pennill

eisteddfodd

flummery

coble

gull

brill

Probably the most important loanword from Welsh is *baban* that is today found both as *babe* and *baby* (these two words have also been introduced to many other languages around the world).

There are several cases where Celtic words found their way into Present Day English via another language. French words *dolmen* and *menhir* became part of English however there were both originally Celtic words. Another example is the word *ambassador* which arrived via the French *ambassadeur* from Latin *ambactus* which in turn came from Celtic **ambaktos* (which means a 'follower'). The word *bitumen* came from Latin *bitūmen* which in turn came from Celtic **betu*. The word *budget* comes from French *bougette* (which means a 'small sack') while the source for this word is the Gaulish **bulgā*. Here are some other Gaulish words which survived in French and were also taken over into English:

gravel

marl

truant

lawn

ouch

vassal

league

quay

valet

lees

skein

varlet

The reverse is also true, i. e. some words from other languages found their way into English via Celtic languages. For example from Irish came ancor (which came from Old Irish anchara which is based on Latin anachoreta) and cros (which came from Old Irish cross based on Latin crux). The Latin Fontana was transformed into English funta via the Celtic. The word clan is originally Latin (despite its coming from Gaelic clan).

Since a lot of research is yet to be completed in this field (as well as due to continuing debates on the topic) there is no a single source of Celtic loanwords at present which can be taken as a complete reference. It is interesting however that the second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary lists 549 entries with Celtic etymology (Klemola 2003: 4). While it is suspected that this number should be much greater there remains the problem of such loanwords still not being recognized (most likely due to a certain ‘inherited’ bias and prejudice on the side of researchers as well as the prevailing historical theory on the Adventus Saxonum which lasted for a very long time and was only re-evaluated in recent times). This was stated explicitly by Filppula et al. at an 1994 colloquium:

“ A further parallel exists in the form of under-reporting Celtic loanwords in the English lexicographical tradition. [...] Nevertheless, it is clear to me that, <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-to-celtic-influence-in-english-language-history-essay/>

for a mixture of reasons (primarily ignorance and ideological bias) there are words and phrases which could be added to the list of recognized Celtic loans in English, but which currently appear as ‘ of uncertain origin’ or similar.”

In regard to the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary and their dismissal of possible Celtic etymologies, Filppula goes on to say:

“ in many cases their judgement appears to have been based on some preconceived notion about the impossibility of such borrowing, instead of being based on comparative and historical research” (Filppula 2003: 165).

The Oxford English Dictionary of course remains one of the central places for reference on English language and it is revised regularly to include new English words as well as to provide updates on new findings related to old words. Therefore it will be of great interest to see how it will continue to develop in the light of new theories and findings in the area of Celtic influences on English.

4. 1 Place Names

English place-names constitute one aspect of Celtic influence on the English language on which there are no disagreements among scholars. Towns such as London, York, Dover, Kent, Lincoln etc. as well as rivers such as the Avon, Thames, Yare etc. all owe their names to Celtic origins. The place-names are especially interesting to researchers since a lot of information can be gathered from them. They primarily provide information about the previous inhabitants of a specific area but they also allow conclusions to be drawn in

regard to the dating of their entrance in a language from which additional information may then be inferred.

In general, place-names do not undergo many changes with the passage of time. However, there are also instances wherein the place-names have been introduced and assimilated into the new language so completely that their original form is no longer recognizable. Thus we can come across some place-names that appear to be of Celtic origins but are in fact based on pre-Celtic elements. Similarly, there are some place-names that appear to be English but were actually taken over from British and restructured to suit the new language. An example for this kind of assimilation is the English town of Leatherhead which came from the Celtic form *LÄ“ drišd (which means ‘grey ford’).

We can find a number of English place-names which were formed by using both Celtic and Anglo-Saxon elements. For example, bre and pen, which are two Celtic words for ‘hill’, are frequently used in a number of place-names. Here are a few examples:

Brill

combination of bre and Old English hyll

Breedon

combination of Celtic bre and dun

Brewood

combination of Celtic bre and Old English wudu

Pensax

combination of Celtic pen and sachson

The last place-name in above list means “ hill of the Anglo-Saxons” and is indicative of the proximity in which Celtic people probably lived with Anglo-Saxons but also of the apparent isolation as noted earlier in this paper.

Another notable feature in place-names is the use of combe and tor. Combe comes from the Celtic word kumb, which means ‘ valley’, and which was adopted into Old English. The word tor, which means ‘ rock’ is used in conjunction with the names of granite peaks in Dartmoor and Bodmin Moor areas, for example Hay Tor, Hound Tor etc. Tor is also apparent in the name of the coastal town Torquay.

4. 2 Personal Names

The field of personal names is another area where there are practically no contentions among the researchers of Celtic influences in English. The available documentation provides ample evidence to support sourcing of many names in Present Day English to Celtic roots. A number of Celtic names appear even in the royal genealogies of Wessex. These names begin with a Celtic name Cerdic while many other names contain for example Cadda or Ceadwalla.

In his 1921 study Förster identifies more than 130 common English names which have a Celtic origin, for example Dewey, Yarnal, Merrick, Onions,

Vowles and so on. Today, their occurrence has spread all over the English speaking areas and there is a continued international popularity of Celtic personal names such as Arthur, Alan, Brian, Bruce, Conan, Kevin etc., although most people do not realize that their names have Celtic origins.

Conclusion

Since the question of Celtic influence in English is a subject which span