

ALFRED BAMMESBERGER / JOACHIM GRZEGA

## ModE *girl* AND OTHER TERMS FOR ‘YOUNG FEMALE PERSON’ IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE HISTORY

### Abstract

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

### Introduction

The history of the word-fields “boy” and “girl” are characterized by a high degree of fluctuation in English as well as in other languages from both an onomasiological and semasiological stand<sup>1</sup>. Although the expressions for ‘female young person’ in English language history have already been analyzed by Bäck (1934) and Stibbe (1935)—for Old English—and Diensberg (1985)—for Middle English, these contributions did not answer all problems. Especially the Modern English *girl* has not been clarified to a sufficient degree yet. This article will therefore shed some new light on the biography of ModE *girl* as well as some other onomasiological types for ‘female young person’ in the history of English.

### 1. ModE *girl*

1.1. In the wake of Robinson’s seminal paper on ‘clothing names’ (Robinson 1967),<sup>2</sup> the etymology of *girl* has been investigated from various angles in recent years. Since no immediately obvious cognates in the meaning ‘girl’ are available in the related Germanic languages the search for the origin of *girl* is relatively wide open. Robinson’s proposal has found acceptance in several further discussions, but it has also been more or less vehemently rejected.

1.2. Robinson’s derivation takes its starting-point from OE *gierela*<sup>3</sup> ‘dress, apparel’, which by Middle English times had come to refer to ‘young person’ by metonymy, and finally the semantic range was narrowed down to ‘young female person’. The semantic development

1 A first look into Buck (1949: 87ff.) already illustrates the many changes in different language groups.

2 The essay was reprinted in Robinson (1993) together with an “Afterword 1992”.

3 The preform of OE *gierela* may be reconstructed as Gmc. *\*garw-ilan-*; the phonology of *girl* will be discussed in more detail below.

underlying this derivation has been reexamined on several occasions. Thus Diensberg (1984: 473) writes: “the author [i.e. Robinson] bases his hypothesis on *gerela*, *gierela*, *gyrela* ‘habit, robe’ which he takes as typical garments of girls and women, an assumption which is unsupported by evidence”. But Diensberg’s objection is certainly not justified in the way he phrases it: At no stage in his presentation does Robinson define OE *gerela* as ‘typical garments of girls and women’; he clearly says that *gerela* is a general term “which has the meaning ‘dress, apparel (worn by either sex)’.” (Robinson 1993: 178). In a reevaluation of Robinson’s proposal Terasawa (1993: 341) concludes that the explanation is plausible:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

8 This usage is attested as early as 1915 (cf. OED, s.v. *babe*).

1.4. The Old English word whose reflex Robinson wants to recognize in *girl* is “*gyrela* (also spelled, although less frequently, *gerela* and *gi(e)rela*), a noun of common occurrence” (Robinson 1993: 178).<sup>9</sup> The main steps in the sound development of Gmc. \**garw-ilan-* to Old English are as follows: *-a-* was ‘brightened’ to *æ*, *g-* /*ɣ-* was palatalized to *ġ-* /*ȝ-*; and in the sequence *ġærw-* breaking led to *ġearw-*;<sup>10</sup> then *-i-* of the suffixal element *-ilan-* caused *i*-umlaut resulting in \**ġierwila* at a prehistoric stage of West Saxon, whereas outside of West Saxon we would expect \**ġerwila*.<sup>11</sup> In both forms the medial *-i-* should undergo syncope, but the sequence *-rwl-* could develop a svarabhakti vowel, so that the result might indeed be *ġierela* or *ġerela* (with loss of *-w-*). With regard to the phonology of the word in question Robinson offered the following comment: “Although Old English spelling is not to be trusted in this respect, it should be mentioned that of the fifty-nine quotations in Bosworth-Toller’s *Dictionary and Supplement* containing the element *gyrela*, thirty are spelled with *y*, fifteen with *i(e)*, and fourteen with *e*. These spellings may well reflect *y* developed from “unstable *i*” in late Old English.” (Robinson 1993: 179, note 21). All the forms considered so far undoubtedly had palatal *ġ* /*ȝ-* in initial position, their reflex could be \**yirl* in Modern English: The /*g-*/ of *girl* requires an explanation.

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

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

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

9 The word is indeed common to all dialects of Old English; see Wenisch (1979: 290).

10 The question of whether palatal diphthongization occurred in the form we are concerned with need not detain us here, because the result would be the same as that of breaking.

11 <*ġ*> (= palatalized /*ȝ-*/) and <*g*> (= velar /*g*/) will be consistently differentiated in this paper because the opposition is of vital importance. Old English manuscripts use one grapheme only to represent /*ȝ*/ and /*g*/ and also inherited /*j*/, which fell together with /*ȝ*/.

12 Brightening is not found if the root vowel /*a*/ was followed by *a*, *o*, *u* (e.g. [plural] *dagas* ~ *dæg*), but it is usually assumed that /*a*/ had indeed been brightened to [æ] and then reverted to /*a*/ under the influence of the vowel in the following syllable.

(WS [dat. pl.] *bearnum* ‘children’), *uarp* (WS *wearp* ‘warp’), *warþ* (WS *wearþ* ‘became’) etc. are found in the early Northumbrian documents, and “for what it is worth, the early Northumbrian evidence is consistent” in the sense that ‘retraction of  $\text{æ} > a$  before  $r$  plus cons. in a labial environment’ (Ball 1988: 111) occurred without exception. The phenomenon is also found in texts that are not immediately considered as Northumbrian: In the early glossaries we find both breaking of  $\text{æ} > ea$  (e.g. *spearuua*<sup>13</sup>) and retraction (e.g. *foe(s)tribarn*<sup>14</sup>). Even if it is not possible to delimit precisely the area in which retraction of  $\text{æ}r$  before a further consonant in a labial environment occurred, there is no doubt that this phenomenon is found in varieties of the Anglian dialect. It may be best to refer to the varieties that exhibit this feature as “*barn*-dialects”. At the stage of *i*-umlaut, the phoneme /a/ occurring in words of this type in the *barn*-dialects yielded /æ/ if *i/j* occurred in the following syllable.<sup>15</sup>

1.8. In the *barn*-dialects Gmc. \**garw-ilan-* would have led to \**gærw-ilan-* by brightening, but retraction of  $\text{æ} > a$  is to be expected. The immediate starting-point for the phonologically regular development in the *barn*-dialects is therefore \**garw-ilan-* (identical in shape with the Proto-Germanic reconstruction). The initial *g-* would have remained without palatalization and led to the voiced stop /g-/ just as in all other cases where *g-* was not followed by a palatal vowel. At the stage of *i*-umlaut /*garwila*/ yielded /*gærwila*/ > /*gærwla*/ (with syncope) > /*gærela*/ (svarabhakti vowel).<sup>16</sup>

1.9. It is particularly noteworthy that besides the forms noted in 4. the form *gærela* is in fact attested. In the gloss of the *Rushworth Gospels* we find 7 *gærwende hine gegærelum* rendering ‘et exuentes eum clamidem’ (Matthew 27, 28 [Skeat 1887: 233]). The present participle *gærwende*<sup>17</sup> shows the same phonological development: Gmc. \**garw-ij-and-ija-* > *gærwende* with initial /g-/ developed in the *barn*-dialects, whereas otherwise *gierwende* with initial /ɣ-/ is found. As Ball (1988: 113) briefly pointed out Modern English *gear* may well have been adopted from a *barn*-dialect and need not owe its initial /g-/ to Scandinavian influence.

1.10. From the phonological point of view the initial consonant /g-/ in *girl* is regularly to be expected in the *barn*-dialects of Old English. If we assume that *girl* adopted the consonant from the *barn*-dialects, then the form can be accounted for.

1.11. Finally, mention should be made of the variant *gal*. The form can be found in many dialects (cf. SED item VIII.1.3.) and is first attested in 1785 (cf. OED s.v. *gal*). The motive for this phonetic aberration is not really clear. Maybe the form is patterned on *pal*, which belongs to the same word-field and is first recorded already in 1681/82 (cf. OED, the term is said to go back to a Transilvanian Gypsy word *pçal* ‘brother’).

1.12. To sum up: Phonologically *girl* can be interpreted as the regular continuation of OE *gærela*, which answers to *gierela* in West Saxon and *gerela* in Anglian; *gærela* is to be expected in the *barn*-dialects of Old English. The semantic development of ‘garment’ >

13 Epinal 435: *fenus spearuua* (Sweet 1885: 62, Pfeifer 1974: 24); the lemma of this gloss is unclear, but the interpretamentum is likely to represent the word for ‘sparrow’.

14 Erfurt 108: *alumnae foetribarn* (Sweet 1885: 42, Pfeifer 1974: 8). The corresponding gloss in Epinal reads *alumne fosturbearn*.

15 Problems of Anglian vocalism were dealt with by Kuhn on several occasions; see Kuhn (1939) and Kuhn (1945). With regard to the glossaries Dieter (1885) is still a major source of information.

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

17 On both  $\text{æ}$  and  $e$  as the root vowel in this verb see further Toon (1983: 131).

‘human being (wearing this garment)’ by metonymy can be paralleled by *brat*. The meaning of ‘girl’ was further restricted from ‘young human being’ > ‘female young human being’.

## 2. ModE *maiden* and *maid*

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

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

## 3. ModE dial. [ˈmɔːðə] and [mɔː]

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

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

## 4. OE *ides*

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

4.2. The origin of OE *ides* and formally and semantically similar forms, such as OHG *itis*, OS *idis*, ON *dís*, Go. *filu-deisei* in other Indo-European languages has been a hotly debated issue. Early theories (by J. Grimm, R. Kögel, F. Jostes, Th. von Grienberger, Uhlenbeck) are summarized in an article by Erik Brate (1911/12). Brate himself departs from ON *dís*, which he defines as ‘woman who comes from another world where she had gone to by her death and who now comes to our world to influence the life and fate of humans’ and reconstructs a Gmc. *\*ið-t̥-s*, which he interprets as a compound of the Indo-European roots

\*ið- ‘again’ and \*i- ‘to go’; for him, the *Dises* are ‘those who have returned’. But the combination of the roots for ‘again’ and ‘to go’ plus an *s*-suffix seem not entirely plausible for a meaning ‘those who have returned’. Holthausen (1935: 185) sees a connection with *ād* ‘stake, fire, flame’, itself related to Lat. *aedēs* ‘house; originally: stove’; but here, too, a semantic filiation seems hardly plausible.

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

## 5. OE *scielcen*

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

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

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

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