Onomastic Sophistication of the Gypsies of Wales

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IT HAS BEEN GENERALLY acknowledged that the most thorough treatment of any Romany dialect is that by John Sampson in his admirable study[1] of the language of the Gypsies of Wales. Other important contributions by him are published in various numbers of the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*[2]. Not lacking predecessors, and aided specifically in his work by an imposing array of philological and linguistic scholars, he is modest in his expressions of gratitude for their assistance; but his work evinces countless signs of independent, although rarely capricious, reasoning. The period of research and field work covered in his principal volume extended for over a quarter of a century, from 1894 to the early 1920's. Realizing (p. xi) that Welsh Romany was in "its Augustan, or at least its Silver Age," he foresaw the end of the "ancient speech" in a generation or two. Yet many from whose lips he heard the Romany dialect were young children, and it is not impossible that some of them preserve that tongue even today, while living under changed conditions but partly in movable homes still designated by the old name "caravan," though constituting a far different type of vehicle. The essence of Romany life is also menaced by allegedly progressive legislation.[3]

The Welsh Gypsies who furnished Dr. Sampson with his material were, in some respects, an unusual breed. For, while not differing markedly in their pursuits and activities from their Romany kin in England and Scotland, who had, however, lost their "ancient" form of speech long ago,[4] the Welsh Gypsies kept that language in what

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1 John Sampson, *The Dialect of the Gypsies of Wales* (Oxford, 1926, repr. 1968).

2 *Cf.* also Sampson's *Welsh Gypsy Folk Tales* (Gregynog, 1933); also Dora E. Yates, *A Book of Gypsy Folk-Tales* (London: Phoenix House, 1948), pp. 11-36.

3 Jeremy Sandford, *Gypsies* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973), pp. xv-xvi, 214-216.

4 They still continued, however, to use a form of Romany, albeit one which some, Sampson included, would regard as "debased."

Sampson regards, unwarrantedly, to be sure, as its "pure" pristine state. His explanation for its later preservation in Wales than elsewhere in Britain is not overly cogent: he speaks of a "dialect religiously kept intact in the fastnesses of Cambria" (p. [vii]). Other parts of the isle have even more formidable fastnesses, Scotland especially, and geography did not prevent the old dialects there from undergoing radical alteration. Nevertheless, the fact of preservation remains, regardless of the opacity of the causes. Moreover, although Romany is not usually written by the Gypsies themselves, one of Sampson's predecessors, Francis Hindes Groome found a Welsh Gypsy who could write the language and who actually corresponded with Groome in that tongue. He was John Roberts of Newton, the "Queen's harper"[5].

Sampson's Gypsies were trilingual in most cases, speaking Romany, English, and Welsh, no mean achievement but one apparently considered quite normal by them. In many ways, despite their innocence of book-learning, they exhibit a more learned grasp of language matters than does the average Englishman or Welshman, presumably because of the additional perspective afforded by their knowledge of three widely-differing (though ultimately related, of course) Indo-European languages.[6] This is not necessarily a *sequitur*, to be sure, for one can think of extremely gifted polyglots who are indifferent or allergic to anything resembling philology or linguistics. But there are notable exceptions also.

It is in the treatment of Welsh place-names in Romany that the kind of philological acumen referred to emerges most conspicuously. The Romany equivalent is very often arrived at by an exact translation of the Welsh original, segment by segment; the Gypsy name is thus a "calque." Welsh place-names, admittedly, often lend themselves to facile analysis, being compounds of considerable transparency of structure, less so of semantics—to one knowing Welsh, of course. But the awareness of that transparency is not shown even by Welsh speakers themselves in many cases, and the literal sense of a place-name cannot be said to be uppermost in a speaker's mind when he utters or hears even the most transparent name, any more than we picture oxen fording a stream when we say "Oxford," or recall "Old" York when hearing "New York," or associate either a spring or a field with the countless places called "Springfield." It is, therefore, conceivable that once the Romany name was achieved, coined, or adapted, it too soon

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5 Sampson, *Dial. of the Gypsies of Wales*, p. viii.

6 The number of language varieties (or "levels") must actually be greater than three, for they also give evidence of knowing Welsh and English dialects.

lost its literal sense in the consciousness of speakers, while retaining the obvious semantic content implicit in its form. Still, the nature of the Romany rendition is often such as to make complete obliviousness unlikely.

Geographical names as treated in Welsh Romany may be classified under various headings, for example: Literal and Quasi-Literal Renditions; Popular Etymology; Partial Translations; Modifications of the Originals; Substitute Appellations. The examples are all taken from the wealth of material in Sampson's book. The system of transliteration used here departs somewhat from the latter's admirable transcription, chiefly to bring it more in accord with the symbols of the I. P. A. and to obviate possible complications in printing (p' t' k' indicate aspirated voiceless stops). It is not to be regarded as an attempt to improve on Sampson's notation. The place-names mentioned are in most instances —not all—those that were Welsh, rather than English, in their original forms.

LITERAL AND QUASI-LITERAL RENDITIONS

WELSH NAME	MEANING	ROMANY VERSION
Craig Felen (nr. Aberdaron)	"Yellow Rock"	o: melano: ba:r ("the yellow rock")
Bryn y Pys (mansion, Flintshire)	"Pea Hill"	bobéŋi: filišín ("bean palace")
Cefn	"Ridge; back"	duméski: vliǰa ("back/dorsal village")
Bryn-yr-Eryr	"Eagle Hill"	i: e:gléski: mu:ra ("eagle mount")
Clawdd Newydd	"New hedge/fence"	ne:vi: bɔ:r (ditto)
Côt Goch	"Redcoat"	lole: čoxéŋi: filišín ("palace")[7]
Plas Coch (name of an inn)	"Red Mansion"	lole: filišinaki: kirčima ("red-palace inn")
Eglwys Bach	"Little Church"	bita kaŋeri: (ditto)
Ffynnon Ddu	"Black Spring"	i: kɔ:li: xení: ("the black spring")
Craig Aderyn (near Towyn)	"Bird Rock"	i: čerikléski: mu:ra ("the bird mount")

7 The phonetic sign [x] designates the voiceless velar fricative.

Bedd y Cawr	"The Giant's Grave"	i: bɔ:re: mu:ršésko: t'an ("the big-man's place/abode")
Trwyn Du (headland, Anglesey)	"Black Nose"	kɔ:lo: nak' (ditto)
Cae Gwyn	"White field"	pɔ:rni: p'u:v (ditto)
Colomendy (name of a hill)	"Dovecote"	pištenéŋi: filišín ("pigeon's castle")
Pont Newydd (nr. Carnarvon)	"Newbridge"	ne:vi: p'u:rǰ (ditto)
Coed Du (farm nr. Maentwrog)	"Blackwoods"	kɔ:le: ruk'a: ("black trees")
Coed Coch	"Red woods"	lole: ruk'a: (ditto)
Cader y Bwgan	"Bogie's Seat"	beŋéski: skamin ("Devil's chair")
Traeth Goch	"Red Strand"	lole: stranáki: vliǰa ("red strand village")
Llyn Crochan	"Lake of the Pot"	pi:ri:áko: pa:ni: (ditto)

The above involve a rather straightforward process of translation from Welsh into Romany. At the same time, there is far more awareness indicated of the meanings of these place-names than that possessed by the average inhabitant of Wales, whether Welsh-speaking or English-speaking.

POPULAR ETYMOLOGY

Although the literal Romany equivalents of Welsh place-names reveal a good knowledge of the Welsh language, it is, paradoxically enough, more interesting and more revealing to look at those renditions that, for all their ingenuity, miss the mark. Here the process of analysis is clear and the operation of "popular etymology" patent.

The place-name *Llanfihangel* is of frequent occurrence throughout Wales. It involves a certain amount of haplology in its formation, for the second member is *Mihangel* "Michael" + "angel" (*Michelangelo*, as it were). *Llan-*, with which a host of place-names begin, is an ancient word for "enclosure" and in names usually = "church, chapel" or the village around an ecclesiastic compound. The Romany name for *Llanfihangel*, however, is i: kunséski: vliǰa "the corner village," and the

reason must lie in the interpretation of *angel* as "angle, ingle, corner"—a meaning that can only have come from English.

Machynlleth consists of *ma-* "field" + *Cynllaith*, a man's name, possibly, although other explanations are conceivable.[8] But Romany bɔ:le: aro: t'ud results from interpreting the name as *moch yn llaeth* "pigs in milk," which is what the Romany words mean.

Rhaeadr (a town in Radnorshire) = "waterfall," but the Romany translation is kistimásko: gav "town of the rider"—the Welsh name vaguely resembling in pronunciation English *rider*.

Capel Curig "St. Curig's Chapel" is ba:réski: kaɲeri:áki: vliǰa "stone chapel village." *Curig* is identified with *cerrig* "stones" (and the two Welsh words do sound very much alike, despite the orthography).

The River Dee is called o: kɔ:lo:pa:ni: "the black water" (Welsh *du* "black" being pronounced, in parts of Wales, similarly to *Dee*, although the latter is of entirely different origin).

Dinas Bran "Fortress of Bran" (probably the gigantic figure in the second branch of the *Mabinogi*) is rendered korakéɲe: mu:ra "Raven Mount" because of the Welsh *brân* "raven."

Llandyrnog, possibly "Church of Tyrnog," becomes ku:rimáski: vliǰa "pugnacious/fighting village," because of Welsh *dyrnu* "pummel, thump, box," *dyrnod* "blow, cuff, box" (from *dwrn* "fist").

Swansea (Scandinavian: possibly "Swain's Isle") becomes Romany pɔ:rne: čeriklésko: gav "town of the white bird."

Pont Senni/Sennybridge (over River Senni) becomes k'ameskero p'urǰ "sunny bridge," as if *Senni* = Eng. *sunny*.

Maes Mawr (name of a castle) = "Greatfield". The Romany equivalent is maséski: bɔ:ri: filišín ("meat" + "great castle"). *Maes* "field" was evidently equated with Romany *mas* "meat" (and the pronunciation of *maes* approaches that of *mas* in many Welsh dialects).

Llangollen, which contains the saint's name *Collen*, is called in Romany penaxéɲo: gav "nut town," as if the second member were *collen* "hazel."

Llan Nefydd becomes pi:imá:sko: gav "drinking town," as if it were **llan yfed*. Nefydd is presumably a man's name.

The Welsh Romany for *Hereford* is balano: pi:ro: "hairy foot," and one wonders if somebody was having a bit of a joke.

Pontypridd is called čikéski: p'urǰ "earthen bridge," an interpretation often made by Welshmen, flimsy as such a structure (and interpreta-

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8 Sir Ifor Williams, *Enwau Lleoedd* ["Place-names"] (Liverpool: Hugh Evans a'i Feibion, 1945), p. 31.

tion) would be. The correct analysis seems to be *Pont-y-tŷ-pridd* "the bridge of the earthen house"; *cf.* Sir Ifor Williams, *Enwau Lleoedd*, pp. 55-56.

St. Dogmael (Cardiganshire) is rendered ǰukleŋi: vliǰa "Dogville," although the good saint had no special canine connections.

Holyhead becomes Romany kɔ:reŋo: še:ro: "thorn head," as if the name were *Holly Head (which is the usual pronunciation).

Tremeirchion, in Flintshire, becomes i: rakyéŋo: gav "the girls' town," as if it contained *merch, merched* "girl(s)," instead of *march, meirch* "steed(s)." *Henllan* "Oldchurch" is rendered ka:ni:áki vliǰa "hen village," Welsh *hen* "old" being apparently interpreted as Eng. *hen*. And *Milford Haven* is called in Welsh Romany i: ravnéski: vlija, "the heavenly village," a title to which it scarcely aspires; here *haven* is understood as "heaven." But some Romany whimsy may lie behind the Welsh Gypsy word for Bulgaria: guruvesko: t'em "Oxland, Bull-land, Bull-garia"! A lighter note is struck in the Welsh Romany for *America*, which is savimáski: klizin "A Merry Key."

PARTIAL TRANSLATIONS

WELSH ORIGINAL	ROMANY RENDITION
Penrhyndeudraeth "Two-beach Promontory"	Dui: stranéŋi: vliǰa "two-beach village"
Pwllheli "Salt pit (?)"	londésko: gav "Salt town"
Betws-y-Coed "Beadhouse/Chapel in the Wood"	ruk'éŋi: vliǰa "Woodville"
Cerrig y Drudion "Rocks of the Heroes" (not "Druids," despite some guidebooks)	ba:renéŋi: vliǰa "Rockville"
Llanfairfechan "Little Chapel of St. Mary"	i: bita vliǰa "Littleville"
Cross Foxes (inn at Llandrillo)	i: mu:renéŋe: ǰukela: "the mountain dogs" (foxes)
Holywell	i: xenáko: gav "the well-town"
Cader Idris "Chair of Idris" (prob. a giant), mountain in Merionethshire	skaminyáki: mu:ra "Chair Mount"
Pont Aberglaslyn "Bridge of the Efflux of Green Lake"	zelani: pu:rǰ "Green bridge"

Penmaenmawr "Great Stone Head" (village in Carnarvonshire)	bɔ:re: šeréski: vliǰa "Great head village"
Maenclochog "Noisy stone" or "Bell-stone"	tɔŋáki: vliǰa "Bellville"
Cwm-y-Glo "Coal Valley"	vaŋa:réski: vliǰa "Coalville"
Prydain Fawr/Great Britain	mɔ:ro t'em "Great Land"

The reduction seen in partial translations is not in the direction of eliminating cumbersome elements or shortening long names, for the resultant Romany forms are not shorter than the Welsh originals. Omitted items are usually replaced by—but not equated with—*vliǰa* "village" or *gav* "town," and it appears that Romany almost demands such designation of pertinent place-names. There is also general rejection, or conceivably misunderstanding, of Welsh religious and mythological references.

ADAPTATION AND MODIFICATION OF ORIGINALS

WELSH FORM	ROMANY MODIFICATION
Sir Fon [šì:r: vó:n] "Anglesey"	širvo:na
Bangor	baŋra
Llanbedr	bedra
Aberffraw	berfro:a
Barmouth/Abermaw/Bermo	be:rmo:a
Llanberis	berísa
Llangefni	gevní:a
Corwen	korvena
Llanrwst	ru:sta
Amlwch	yamluxa
Carnarvon/Caernarfon	ka:rnavena

Here the altered form assumes an aspect that seems to fit the Romany phonological scheme. There does not appear to be a discernible Romany meaning in most instances. Hence the words are, in a sense, foreign names. The omission of *Llan-* shows realization of which element in such names is the significant and identifying one. But the resultant name is usually not the form that would occur by itself in Welsh. Instead of *Bedra, Berisa, Gevnia,* e.g., the names would be *Pedr, Peris, Cefni* (reference is principally to the initial sounds). Hence the

subtleties of Celtic lenition are not grasped in these cases, something for which even the most astute Romany can be forgiven (in some of the other instances mentioned previously—*Llangollen*, e.g.,—a real awareness of lenition was shown).

SUBSTITUTE APPELLATIONS

In a number of names, Romany onomastic practice neither translates the Welsh originals—wholly or in part—nor adapts Welsh forms to the Romany pattern, but replaces the native names with new, descriptive labels. These may reflect Gypsy experience, bitter or sweet, in various places. They also reveal inventiveness, acumen, and, in some regrettable instances, all too human prejudices.

ORIGINAL NAME	ROMANY SUBSTITUTE
Wrexham	i: lole: ba:réŋo: gav "the red stone town"
Cardiganshire	zuminάko: t'em "Broth land"
Aberystwyth	zuminάko: gav "Broth town"
Ffrainc/France	ǰambéŋo: t'em "Frogland"
Llanidloes	pošumésko: gav "Wool town"
Cheshire	ki: alésko: t'em "Cheese country"
Anglesey/Sir Fon	mu:záko: t'em "Porridge country"
Sir Gaernarfon/Carnarvonshire	slacéŋo: t'em "Slate country"
Denbigh	sutle: mɔ:résko: t'em "Sour bread country"
Bethesda	ba:renéŋi: vliǰa "Stone village" (reference to quarries)
Moelfre (Anglesey)	gračéŋi: vliǰa "Herring village"
Rhewl (Flintshire)	kru:denéŋi: vliǰa "Curd village"
Nefyn (Carnarvonshire)	mačéŋi: vliǰa "Fish village"
Llanymynech	kɔ:léŋi: vliǰa "Gypsy village"(!)

A similar process of rendering place-names is seen on the part of English Gypsies. George Borrow, whose enthusiasm was not always matched by accuracy, gives, among others, the following English

Romany equivalents of various geographical names.[9]

	ENGLISH ROMANY
Hampshire	Baulo-mengreskey tem "Swineherds' country"
Sussex	Bokra-mengreskey tem "Shepherds' country"
Northumberland	Boro gueroneskey tem "Big fellows' country"
Suffolk	Dinelo ten "Fools' country"
Manchester	Jinney-mengreskey gav "Sharpers' town"
Birmingham	Kaulo gav "Black town"
Oxford	Lil-engreskey gav "Book-fellows' town"
Yarmouth	Match-eneskey gav "Fishy town"
Canterbury	Mi-develeskey gav "My God's town"
London	Mi-krauliskey gav "Royal town"
Wales	Porrum-engreskey tem "Leek-eaters' country"[10]
Cheshire	Tudlo tem "Milk country"
Newcastle	Wongareskey gav "Coal town"
Norwich	Rokengreskey gav "Talking fellows' country"

There are also country-names containing ethnic slurs, and in this respect the English Romany are no better than their Welsh Romany kinfolk. But English Romany names do not reveal the often extremely acute onomastic analysis shown by Welsh Gypsy counterparts.

It is hardly possible to envisage with any certainty the actual process of rendering place-names in Welsh Romany. One surmises that some of the analogical and folk-etymological forms resulted from auditory perception, for they would scarcely have been arrived at visually. It has, as was stated above, been claimed that Gypsies do not read or write. That may be true, though not universally, for their own language. But they are often literate in the language(s) of the countries where they live. References can be found to their reading place-names on sign-posts, e.g. Hence the place-names of Wales were visually encountered by at least those (specialists?) who did read. They have, in addition, their own secret markings, so that actual reading of language may not be a

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9 George Borrow, *Romano Lavo-Lil, Word-book of the Romany or English Gypsy Language* (London: John Murray, 1874, repr. 1926), pp. 112-115.

10 *Cf.* the Welsh Romany for "Breton": purum-eŋero: "onion-man," as purveyor, however, rather than consumer.

prerequisite to their travels.

What remains a mystery in the case of the Welsh Gypsies is their unusual facility in rendering names via the process of loan-translation. This must have been the achievement of individuals, perhaps of one or two, for only an incurable romantic would think that the entire Romany population spontaneously called Welsh place-names by Romany counterparts. It is, nevertheless, just as surprising to see a Gypsy name faithfully translating a Welsh one as it was to me to see for the first time *Obersee* on a German map as the equivalent of Lake Superior (which may or may not mean the same thing) or as it would be to see the (highly improbable form) **Penns Wälder* for Pennsylvania.

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