

The Etymology of English *toad*: Effects of the Celtic substrate?

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Scientific taxonomy makes no distinction between frogs and toads but popular culture, with its folk taxonomies, associates toads not only with drier skin and more terrestrial habitats than creatures commonly called frogs but also posits affinities with venom, organic decomposition, witchcraft, and evil. A toad might be a witch's familiar. As is often the case with popular belief, antithetical properties were also ascribed: great wisdom as a result of great age, and the positive medicinal properties of various parts of the animal's body. The toadstone, thought contained in the creature's massive head, was believed to encompass all these powers.¹ Both sets of associations, if indeed the recognition of more than a single set is justified, will assist in pursuing an origin for the English name of this class of amphibian: *toad*. The *OED* has the following full and interesting entry (here edited for length), illustrative of the more ample treatment now practicable with online publishing. Two early forms are recognised: *tádige* (var. *tádie*) and *tadde*.

“Etymology: Old English *tádige*, of unknown origin and unusual form, has no cognates in the other languages. ... The relation of *tadde* to *tádige*, *tádie* is not clear: Björkman thinks it a hypocoristic form with shortened vowel and doubled cons.; it survived in s.w. Middle English *tadde*. ... The northern *tade*, *taid*, *teäde*, *ted* and midl. *tôde*, *tood*, *toad*, with long vowel and single cons., probably represented *tádige*, *tádie*, with its unusual ending reduced to *-e*.”²

Before questioning the claim of an absence of cognates in other languages, it is well to bear in mind the proposal of a hypocoristic term (in English or other languages), if the scope of this process of renaming is extended from familiar and children's language to include tabu-driven linguistic avoidance and the substitution of noa words, conceivably via a loan from another dialect or language. This is characteristic of a large number of names for animals that are seen to present a threat to an agrarian economy. Unrelated, then, to English *toad*, save perhaps in the way that the names came about, are Greek *bátrakhos* (“ohne Etymologie”);³ Latin *bufo* (called an Osco-Sabellian loanword);⁴ Middle Low German *padde* (from *pad* “pad, sole of the foot”);⁵ Swedish *padda* (unconvincingly traced to Greek *bátrakhos* “frog”);⁶ and modern German *kröte*, about which a leading etymologist opines: “Die Herkunft des Namens ist ungeklärt.”⁷ As is the case with the majority of Romance terms, Spanish *sapo* does not perpetuate Latin *bufo* and is judged by Iberian lexicographers to stem from a pre-Indo-European word (Basque, a possible candidate has, however, *apo*, thought to be based on a misapprehension of Spanish *los sapos*).⁸ Italian *rospo* “rough-skinned”,⁹ Romanian *broască râioasă* “mangy frog” (euphemism? < Latin *brosca*). French *crapaud* is judged to derive from a hypothetical Germanic **krappa* (mostly plausibly a Frankish form) meaning “hook”, a reference to the toes of the amphibian.¹⁰ But why should this detail, in metonymical fashion, generate a name? Another noa word, where the trivial (toe) replaces the threatening (wart)? Thus, from this quick survey, which does not seek to plumb all the philological speculation on names for the toad in western Europe, it appears

that the *de facie* anomalous position of *toad* among English zoonyms is not anomalous at all, but follows the general trend for names for this amphibian and may well have been determined by the same human processes of physical and verbal avoidance.

It is always possible that the *tādige*, *tadde* of Old English represents an original coinage that could have passed through several evolutionary stages from an Indo-European or Germanic root to the first recorded but isolated form in Britain. But if this name for the amphibian seems not to have been brought to Britain by Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Norsemen, or some smaller population group before the first written attestation in ca. 1000, we must also consider whether the word was not already there, that is, was an element of the insular Celtic language Old British, and as a substrate lexeme was adopted by the invading Anglo-Saxons, for taboo reasons as suggested above or for some other reason, now perhaps impossible to recover. Since Old British has left no written records, the language must be reconstructed to the extent possible by the consideration of personal and place names, and ethnonyms. Other lexical resources for this reconstruction lie in the languages most closely related to Old British, viz., Gaulish, Cornish, Welsh, and Breton. Here the range of names for the toad is considerable. Gaulish, a substantial amount of the lexical evidence for which is drawn from *defixiones* or curses, uses a root *craxto-* “pustular” for the toad.¹¹ This is a reference to the paratoid glands (“warts”) on the head, which contain a toxic substance, bufotoxin, that deters potential predators. Here lies the central fact of the toad’s association with poison and by extension with potions and witchcraft. The Celtic Lexicon Project reconstructs a Proto-Celtic form **lu/isϕant*, which is reflected in Irish *lafan* and Welsh *llyffant* “frog, toad”.¹² Numerous other lexemes are also found, e.g., Irish *loscann* (the literary record has the phrase *lingur loscann* “toad’s venom”) along with borrowings from Latin, *bufa*, and English, *frog*. An earlier, less common name in Welsh is *breuog*, a term interpreted to mean that the toad was thought to eat rotting corpses.¹³ A common term in Cornish is *kronek* “the bulbous one”. None of these is, however, suggestive of Old English *tādige*, *tadde*. From Breton are recorded *gweskele*, *glesker*, and *tonouloscan*.¹⁴ Of more compelling interest, however, is the Breton form *touseg/toseg* (plural *touséged*, *touségi*), which has a strong affect of disgust for Breton speakers.¹⁵ The root *tous-* (*-eg* is a suffix of attribution) has cognates in Irish *tais* “damp, moist” and *taise*, both “dampness, moisture” and “corpse, relic”, in Welsh *toes* “sticky mass” (often a lump of dough, as wetted flour), and possibly in the Breton verb *toula* “to make wet”. For Welsh *toes*, the Welsh historical dictionary, *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, posits an underlying Proto-Celtic form **tāi-s-to-*, which derives from the reconstructed Indo-European root **tā-*, among whose basic meanings may be noted “to moisten, make wet”. Reflexes in Indo-European languages suggestive of the root’s subsequent use to designate the toad are Greek τῖφος “marsh”, Latin *tābum* “slime, pestilence”, Germanic **peinan* “to make wet”. The Old English reflex *þawian* “to thaw” points in a rather different direction.¹⁶

To open a parenthesis but stay with Germanic, Old English *tadde* “toad” is believed to have had a synonym. On the basis of Middle English *pade* (mod. regional Eng. *pad*), an Old English **pada*, **padda* (Mercian *peada*, *peadda*, all clearly related to the Germanic forms seen above) is postulated.¹⁷ The possible interaction of this lexeme with the antecedents of *toad* will be discussed presently.

On the basis of Breton *touseg* “toad” and related Celtic and other evidence for moist objects and environments (Old Irish *taise*, Old Welsh *toes*), it is proposed that the Old British designation of the toad was also a derivative of Proto-Celtic **tāi-s-to-*. The essential signification of the word would have been “the slimy one”. It may have had a form such as **toasteg* or *toaseg*, reflecting the two outcomes of intervocalic *-st-* in British, although the retention of the dental *-t-* seems to correspond better to subsequent developments.¹⁸ As will have been noted, there is a surprising coincidence between the ending of the Breton plural form *touségi* and the Old English singular *tádige*. This might encourage the speculation that an Old British plural form was adapted into Anglo-Saxon as a singular.¹⁹ Yet morphological elements are too slim as evidence to alone bear up such an argument. The real question is whether intervocalic *st* or *s* could have developed first to voiced *z*, then to the plosive affricate *dz*, and ultimately be reduced to *d*: *toasegi* > *toazegi* > *tádzige* > *tádige*. Such a hypothetical development might have been encouraged by the presence in Anglo-Saxon of **padde* “toad”, so that the Old British form contributes an initial *t-* to a familiar ending to create a new hybrid: *t + adde*, which shared the hypocoristic form and affect of short vowel + geminated consonant. Interaction between the two designations could also have furthered the apparent reduction of *tádige* to *tadde*. Just as English *frog* and *toad* call up different associations, so *padde* and *tadde* could have been distinguished in early Old English. *Padde* might have evoked images of the largely innocuous toads met in British fields, while the *tadde* figured in the preparation of potions and was the familiar of witches.²⁰ Some women so designated may have been members of the original British population. Such romantic fancyings aside, *tadde* may have been a negatively marked form, while *padde* was more neutral. Simpler still, the two terms may have had distinct regional distributions. At any event, *pad* survived longest in the north. But to return to basics, Anglo-Saxon **padde* may itself already have been a noa word, borrowed from neighboring Germanic languages. Curiously, in light of the presence of cognates in West Frisian *pod*, *podde*, Middle Dutch *padde*, Middle Low German *padde*, *pedde*, Old Icelandic and Old Swedish *padda*, and Old Danish *padde*, it is not recorded for Old Saxon.²¹

Linguistic interaction between speakers of Old British and the Germanic invaders and settlers identified as Angles and Saxons was inevitable, whether this contact was violent, as an earlier historical view would have it, or more peaceful and gradual. Very little trace of this early Celtic language has been identified in Old and Middle English. Zoonyms can lay no greater claim than any other semantic field to have preserved the influence of an Old British substrate but it does seem plausible that the designation of an animal, toward which attitudes in many cultures were ambivalent, even polarised, could have been a linguistic act informed by euphemism, hypocorism, indirect phrasing, loans, and other substitutions. Since Germanic **padde* is believed to have been part of Old English lexis, the presence of a doublet, in semantic terms, but one perhaps with a very difference cultural valence, is plausible. The presence of *toad* may well be explained by an assumption from Celtic.

Contrary to prior opinion, *toad* is seen to have cognates in insular Celtic, and its lexicographical isolation is further reduced when viewed in the light of the synonym *padde* and the possibility that this zoonym, like many of its counterparts in other European

languages, has been shaped by taboo avoidance or related linguistic processes of substitution. To conclude, the commonplace view of the toad on the one hand and its centrality in popular conceptions of black magic are illustrated in a quotation from Rudyard Kipling and in the well known witches' incantation in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In a kind of epigram to a poem on an M.P. visiting India, Kipling begins:

“The toad beneath the harrow knows
Exactly where each tooth-point goes.
The butterfly upon the road
Preaches contentment to that toad.”²²

The Scottish recipe, in which the toad has pride of place, begins:

“Round about the cauldron go;
In the poison'd entrails throw.
Toad, that under cold stone
Days and nights has thirty-one
Swelter'd venom sleeping got,
Boil thou first i' the charmed pot.”²³

Notes

1. See the summary account in Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England*, pp. 181-182, and snippets of lore in the *English Dialect Dictionary*, 5, pp. 172-174, s.v. *toad*.
2. *OED Online*, October 2016, s.v. *toad*.
3. *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, p. 227.
4. *Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, p. 101.
5. *Mittelniederdeutsches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *padde*.
6. *Svensk etymologisk ordbok*, s.v. *padda*.
7. *DWDS-Wörterbücher*, citing Pfeifer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen*.
8. *Diccionario de la lengua española*, s.v. *sapo*; Trask, s.v. *apo*.
9. *Vocabolario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana*, s.v. *ròspo*.
10. *Trésor de la langue française*, s.v. *crapaud*; *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. **krappa*.
11. *Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise*, p. 129. Unsurprisingly, *craxto-* does not figure among the Gaulish ethnozoonyms examined by Sergent, since it evokes no martial attributes.
12. Celtic Lexicon; *Dictionary of the Irish Language*; *Geiriadur Pryfisgol Cymru*.
13. *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, s.vv.
14. “*Gweskele, glesker, tonouloscan*,” in Ernaut, at 60-63.
15. *Dictionnaire breton-français de Le Gonidec*, p. 575, s.v. *touseg*; *Dictionnaire du Breton contemporain*, s.v. *touseg*. *Dictionnaire étymologique du breton ancien, moyen et moderne* was not accessible at the time of this writing; the etymology, however, is transparent.
16. *Indogermanisches Wörterbuch* and *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. **tā-*.
17. *Mittelniederdeutschen Wörterbuch*, s.v. *padde, pedde, pet*. English *paddle* naturally suggests itself in this context, but, despite other instances in Germanic and the rarely met medieval Latin form *padela*, the etymology is not assured (*OED*).
18. Schrijver, “4.4.3. Proto-Celtic intervocalic **-st-* > Proto-British **-st-*,” pp. 410-413.

19. *Tádige* may also be a nominalized adjective, as suggests Stephen B. P. Durnford (personal communication).
20. Without here invoking the exploitable properties of the toad – knowledge and poison – the frog is lacustrine, green, associated with verdant life, edible, and may be a prince in disguise; the toad is telluric, brown, associated with death, the grave, and mouldering decomposition, inedible, even toxic, and may be a witch in disguise.
21. In Old Saxon records, only Latin-derived *bofo* is found.
22. “Pagett, M.P.”, in Kipling, *Poems*.
23. *Macbeth*, IV.1. in *The Riverside Shakespeare*. John Milton’s depiction in *Paradise Lost* of Satan in the Garden of Eden in the form of a toad taps into both streams of belief concerning the amphibian: superior knowledge that gives the power to shape another’s thoughts for good or evil ends, and the base corporeality of venom that can inflame the body and its desires (Book 4, vv. 796-808):

So saying, on he led his radiant Files,
 Daz’ling the Moon; these to the Bower direct
 In search of whom they sought: him there they found
 Squat like a Toad, close at the eare of Eve;
 Assaying by his Devilish art to reach
 The Organs of her Fancie, and with them forge
 Illusions as he list, Phantasms and Dreams,
 Or if, inspiring venom, he might taint
 Th’ animal spirits that from pure blood arise
 Like gentle breaths from Rivers pure, thence raise
 At least distemperd, discontented thoughts,
 Vaine hopes, vaine aimes, inordinate desires.

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