

## The Etymology of English *earwig*

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In its entry for *dog* n.<sup>1</sup> the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* makes the following specific and general observations (lightly edited):

The word belongs to a set of words of uncertain or phonologically problematic etymology with a stem-final geminated *g* in Old English which is not due to West Germanic consonant gemination and therefore does not undergo assibilation. These words form both a morphological and a semantic group, as they are usually Old English weak masculine nouns and denote animals; compare frog n.<sup>1</sup>, hog n.<sup>1</sup>, pig n.<sup>1</sup>, stag n.<sup>1</sup>, Old English *sugga* (see haysugge n.), Old English *wicga* (see earwig n.), and perhaps teg n.<sup>1</sup>). It has been suggested that these words show expressive gemination, perhaps due to their being originally hypocoristic forms. ... For some of the words, substratal influence has also been considered ... Because attestation of these words in Old English is generally rare and confined to glossaries and onomastic evidence ... if they are attested at all, and also because there is often a better-attested synonym ... it seems likely that the words were stylistically marked in Old English, i.e. considered non-literary or informal.<sup>1</sup>

The present note is devoted to the penultimate member of the above list, the Old English antecedent of *earwig*. The *OED* proposes an etymology that combines *ear* in its conventional sense with Old English *wicga* “insect, beetle”. The compound has been explained as reflecting a popular belief, expressed in many European languages and going back at least to Pliny the Elder, that the earwig, *Forficula auricularia*, crawls into human ears. This is scientifically unfounded. An alternate theory would trace the name to the appearance of the hindwings, which resemble a human ear when unfolded. Yet the wings are visible only when the insect flies, which is rare, and in-flight observations around the year 1000 would have been unlikely, as would be entomological collection and dissection. We seem, then, in the presence of instances of counter-empirical folk belief and learned folk etymology. The *English Dialect Dictionary* records a wide variety of forms (*alliwig*, *arrawig*, *arrawiggle*, *arrywinkle*, *earwike*, *earwig*, etc.), suggesting that there was no popular understanding of the origin of the word.<sup>2</sup> It remains to be seen whether the analysis of the second element of the compound *earwig* will shed any further light on the matter.

Old English *earwicga* is found as a gloss on Latin *blatta* “noxious insects”.<sup>3</sup> Fuller exemplification is found in a medical tract: “wip earwicgan genim þæt micle greate windelstreaw twyecge þæt on worþium wixð, ceow on þæt eare. He bið of sona” (“against earwigs, take the large ‘great two-edged windelstraw’ that grows on highways, chew [and insert] it into the ear. He [the beetle] will soon be off”).<sup>4</sup> The *OED*’s etymological commentary on *earwig* is as follows: “< ear n.<sup>1</sup> + Old English *wicga* insect, beetle, of uncertain origin; compare wig v.<sup>1</sup>, wiggle v.<sup>1</sup>”. Here the phrase “of uncertain origin” is tantamount to saying that the word has no cognates in other Germanic languages, not Old Saxon, from which an immediate descent might be envisaged, nor Old Norse, whose

adstratum influence on emerging Old English was substantial some centuries later. The terminology of Welsh entomology, *chwil*, *pryf*, or Breton *garlósten* “earwig” suggests no influence from this Celtic quarter.

Yet the Celtic language of early continental western Europe, Gaulish, does provide epigraphical evidence for an insect word of interest. This is *uossa-*, *uossi-* “wasp”. It derives through metathesis from an earlier *\*uoxsā-*, *\*uoxsi-* < Proto-Celtic *\*upsa* “wasp”.<sup>5</sup> While Latin *vespa* is well known, a reflex in Welsh is *gwchi* “drone” and in Old Breton *guohi* “wasps”. Proto-Celtic *u-* becomes *\*Wa-* in Proto-British, then *gwa-*.<sup>6</sup> Assuming a basic meaning of “noxious insect”, a tentatively reconstructed form in Old British, the language met by the invading Angles and Saxons, is *\*gwacsa*. This seems, admittedly, some distance from Old English *wicga*. The transformation involves a resolution of the initial consonant cluster in favour of *w-* (since OE phonology had no initial *gw-*), raising of the vowel, and voicing and gemination of the final consonant, the last-named conceivably in the interest of producing a hypocoristic form that would match up with other familiar words for British fauna. Here, the *OED*’s suggestion of influence from the verbs *wig* “to move lightly from side to side” and *wriggle* might also be invoked.<sup>7</sup> The Old British term may well have designated the wasp, as in Gaulish. The transfer to a beetle could be the result of a perceived equivalence between the threats of the insects, the stinger of the wasp and the pincers of the beetle (on the hindquarters of the earwig).

Yet another influence may be considered. The western European “wasp” words are traced to the reconstructed Indo-European root *\*uebh-* meaning “to weave, plait”, possibly in reference to nest construction or flight patterns. There was, however, a homophone, designated *\*uebh-* (2), “to move back and forth”, the very action underlying *wig* and *wiggle*.<sup>8</sup> This IE root has numerous reflexes in the Germanic languages, among which Old English *wibba* “beetle, weevil”. Thus, the initial consonantism and vocalism of the name for related insects may have affected the development of Old British *\*gwacsa* in Old English, while the addition of the qualifier “ear” realised a semantic narrowing to identify the earwig in distinction from other beetles. Whether coincidence or as an aspect of a quite complex development of analogous phonetics and semantics, *ear* was also used of the individual grains of cereals as early as the appearance of *earwicga*.<sup>9</sup> Thus, both the corn weevil (*wibba*) and the earwig (*earwicga*) are seen as inimical to ears.

Of particular interest here is the fact that the Old English *wicga* had no later, evolved forms as a simplex (i.e., not in a compound), such as *wig*, *wick*, or the like. This said, we should not see Old English *earwicga* as a calque on an early compound in another language. Other reflexes, in Gaulish, Welsh, and Breton, it will be recalled, point to other noxious insects than the beetle. Still, a Gaulish *\*ausi-uoxsā*, lit. “ear wasp”, could be imagined, and with it, a British equivalent, given that the concept of the insect as an ear-borer is at least as old as Pliny.<sup>10</sup>

The earwig was naturally also known in the other languages of medieval Britain. It figures in the Latin of medical treatises as *auricula* and *auriculum*. Norman French and Anglo-French follow the Latin suite in employing a word based solely on the concept of the ear, without invoking an insect. Recorded forms are *oreilloun*, *oreylin*, *uriloun* with a

meaning something like “ear-er”.<sup>11</sup> Later, an analytic form, suggesting that such forms were no longer always understood, appeared in Middle French: *perce-oreille*, lit. “pierce-ear, ear-piercer”. As seen in English, the French term most often occurs in an imagined medical context: “Si oreylin est entré en l’orayle, donc comandent les autors mettre enz ameres choses pur tuer le verm” (If an earwig enters the ear, the authorities advise you to put in something bitter to kill the worm [insect]).<sup>12</sup>

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, *earwig* found verbal use. The *OED* defines the verb as “to importune or pester, esp. in private. Also: to influence or bias (a person) secretly; to insinuate oneself into the confidence of (a person)” – to bend someone’s ear, we might say. The verb has fallen from fashion but lives on in the Humphrey Chipden Earwicker of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, ceaselessly returning to his presumed infractions in Phoenix Park. By the end of the book, HCE (“Here Comes Everybody”) is firmly ensconced in our collective inner ear.

*Dog, frog, hog, pig, teg, and stag* have proven remarkably long-lived elements of English vocabulary – but long-time challenges to English etymology – with meaning and form all but unchanged over a millennium. What has been identified by some as early hypocoristic endings has been lost, perhaps as a consequence of the words entering the mainstream of English (but readily replaced by others: *doggy, froggy, piggy*). Although a compound and not a monosyllable, *earwig* joins these words as now also having a plausible etymology. There is no common source, however, for the cluster, since both Celtic and Germanic lexicon has been drawn on; both language families have recourse to geminate final occlusives to realise hypocoristic effect.

## Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary, OED Online, s.v. dog, n.*<sup>1</sup>, accessed July 11th, 2019; for other words in this list, see studies by Sayers.
2. Wright, 2, p. 229.
3. *Antwerp-London Glossaries*, 61, as cited by *OED Online*, 61.
4. *Bald’s Leechbook*, in Cockayne, 1, 3.12.3.
5. Delamarre, p. 307, *s.v. uassos*.
6. Schrijver, 3.3.3., “Proto-British with word-initial \**uo-* > \**Wa-*: material”, pp. 116-121.
7. For these verbs the *OED*’s etymological notes read: “cognate with or < (Middle) Low German *wiggelen*, Middle Dutch *wighelen* (Dutch *wiggelen*), frequentative < *wig-* (compare Low German *wiggen*, Norwegian dialect *vigge*, wig v.<sup>1</sup>). Compare the parallel wag v., waggle v.”
8. Köbler, *s.vv.* \**ueb<sup>h</sup>*- (1) and \**ueb<sup>h</sup>*- (2).
9. *Bald’s Leechbook*, in Cockayne, 1, 51.12.4.
10. Delamarre, p. 62, *s.v. aus(i)*, “ear”.
11. Rothwell, et al, *s.v. oreilloun*<sup>2</sup>, accessed July 11th, 2019.
12. Hunt, 2, p. 83, no. 154.

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