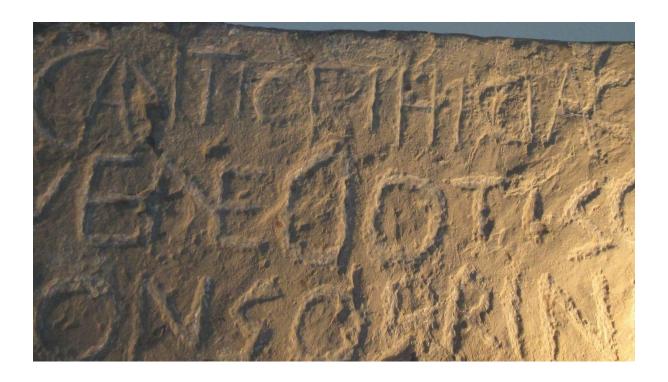# How linguistics can help the historian: part II

Who was on the pig's back?

Have you ever noticed how, if you pick up a big bilingual dictionary operating between English and French, you find the English to French section is half as thick again as the French to English? This is because English actually has many more distinct words than French has. The reason is quite well known: English is essentially a Germanic language but, when England was invaded by the French-speaking Normans, the tongue of the latter had so much influence that it drove the native language underground for centuries as a written medium and nearly knocked it out. Within the spoken realm, French transformed English utterly, but in the long run enriched it immeasurably by successfully donating a huge proportion of its own vocabulary. This meant that in the case of many concepts the later English language had a choice of two words rather than one. However, which word got used in a particular case was not random: distinctions began to be drawn, and these were historically conditioned. Take the following pairs: pig and pork, cow and beef, sheep and mutton. In each case the first is the animal,

the second the meat that comes from it. The animal names are Germanic words native to English, but the second derive from the corresponding French words: *le porc*, *le boeuf*, *le mouton*. But, in French, those are the animals too; so how, within English, did the distinction between meat and animal develop? As was long ago pointed out by Henry Bradley, an early editor of the Oxford English dictionary, the history of the relative status of Normans and native Anglo-Saxons in late medieval England gives us the clue: the native peasants were looking after the animals, but the French-speaking overlords were eating them!

That is a nice example for this series, as it illustrates how, once again, a historical matter (in this case a social circumstance rather than a particular event) has revealed itself by becoming embedded not so much in the surface meanings of the vocabulary that people use, but in the linguistic origins, or etymologies, of the vocabulary itself. And once again, just as archaeologists can cast light on the contexts of the physical artefacts that they dig up by interpreting them accurately, so it was by looking at the etymology of the words involved that Bradley cast light on the contexts in which they were originally used. A fine arena in which to practise using this approach is that of place-names. With these, we have the added bonus that, if it has survived at all, a place-name will usually still be in its original location. Even if it is the name of some insignificant feature like an individual field, for the linguist it is the equivalent of an enormous megalith to the archaeologist — it probably won't have moved much during its history, and that's a help. Now, among the place-names of England one finds such examples as Englefield (Berkshire) and Saxondale (Nottinghamshire). These are both thoroughly English in their etymologies; the names were given by English-speakers, and their meanings tell us whom those English-speakers identified as being the inhabitants of the places concerned. But it only makes sense for a name to identify the nationality of the people who live in a place if those people are seen as being an exception within

the larger area. The etymologies of Englefield and Saxondale therefore remind us, to this day, that the English people once distinguished different nations among themselves: hence Englefield was a settlement specifically of Angles among Saxons, and Saxondale was the habitation of identifiable Saxons dwelling among (Mercian) Angles. Likewise the numerous villages called Walcot in England probably often correspond to outposts where the British Celtic language ancestral to Welsh was still in use. And even after a further wave of invasion, by the Vikings, the Norse name Bretby indicates that its Celtic speech was still a distinguishing mark of the community in that location. But there's more …

England divided

In the instances we have just looked at, the point of interest was what the place-names explicitly meant (even if those meanings had become slightly disguised). But, quite apart from what it may actually mean — and it will always mean something — a place-name also gives out all sorts of other signals. These are encoded in its spelling, in its local pronunciation, and even in the question of what language it is in; and these matters can be decoded, again in much the same way that an archaeologist interprets the context of a physical artefact that has been dug up. For example, the network of Roman roads in Britain radiates out from London, which for communications purposes was already effectively

the capital two thousand years ago. Until the era of the motorways, beginning in the 1960s, no new network of planned roads had ever been imposed, and these long, straight Roman highways, albeit tarmacadamed and maintained, still constituted the trunk infrastructure. One of them is the famous Watling Street, nowadays known more prosaically as the A5, running from London to Holyhead. Now, if you ever embark on the ferry at Dublin port (yes! come the day, that will again be permissible), get off the other side, and proceed by car towards London taking that same A5, look at the signposts as you pass through the midlands near Birmingham. You will notice that small towns and villages located to your left (that is, to the north-east of the road) typically have names such as Kirkby (or Kirby), Ravensthorpe and Buckby, while those to your right, or south-west, are called things like Shilton, Hunningham and Wolfhamcote. Never mind the meanings any more: these names are actually in different languages, seeing that the '-thorpes' and the '-bys' are Norse, and the '-tons', '-hams' and '-cotes' are Old English. Why that distribution? Well, it reflects the fact that for hundreds of years Watling Street was the agreed international frontier between the Danelaw, settled by the Vikings, and the Mercian region of England. The division ceased over a thousand years ago, but by then it had been etched permanently into what we might call the linguistic archaeology of the landscape. Even if all the direct, textual evidence for the Danelaw had been lost a linguist, looking at the map, might still spot the distribution of place-names, see that the different languages were involved, notice that the A5 seemed to be the dividing line, and hypothesise correctly that there had been some sort of agreed frontier running along it in the past.

We have now looked at what we can deduce by excavating a word down to its original meaning, and also by seeing what language it is in (its 'archaeological context', if you like). Linguistics enables us to go further, by investigating (as it were) what material the word is made of. We shall do that in the next

instalment; in the meantime, thanks again for reading — and by all means get in touch with the author (A.Harvey@ria.ie), at the Royal Irish Academy's Dictionary of Celtic Latin project. As stated last time, we are still busy drafting, in spite of the lockdown!