

The Things We Say

The English language is, perhaps more than any other on the planet, the product of hundreds of years of contributions and additions from other languages around the world. It's what makes English so rich and varied, with a vast vocabulary. The question of which language has the most words is more complex than it might first appear (dog/ dogs – one word or two; give/gave/ given – one, two, or three? for example) but most sources agree that English has the most dictionary words with about 200,000 recorded in the OED. This compares with 145,000 in the German Duden, and 130,000 in the French Larousse. Some sources put the number of English words at over half a million – so it might all come down to the definition of what, exactly, constitutes a 'word'.

The list of words imported from abroad is extremely long but includes kayak, kagoul, and canoe from North American, canyon and lasoo from Spanish, bungalow, ketchup, and jamboree from the Indian sub-Continent. Coo-ee (I learned when writing *The Land Beyond the Seas*) comes from a greeting in an Australian aboriginal language – who'd have known?

When I was a boy, my father and his siblings regularly used a few words that they (his brother and sister) had picked up overseas during the War. These included 'bukshee' for things that you manage to get for free, 'cha' (of course) for tea, and 'jildi jildi' for hurry up! These words originate in the middle and far East and are direct result of Britain's involvement abroad both during the First and Second World Wars, and from when it had an empire.

At about the same time, when playing in places we should not have been, we kids used to use the word 'jawl!' to mean run away. As in the shout, when we spotted a green-uniformed University College of North Wales security man: 'There's a greenie coming! Quick! Jawl!' It was years later (when researching Adam's Lock) that I found out that this was a Romany word, itself derived from the languages of Romany gypsies originating in central or Eastern Europe, or even further afield. Why it should end up in the Bangor Aye dialect of my youth, I have no idea!

I've spoken before of the Welsh words I became familiar with as a child, even though the language of the home was English. 'Hogyn drwg!' (Naught boy!) 'Cariad' (Love) and Nos Da (Good night) being a few, and I always referred to my grandfather as Taid and my late grandmother as Nain. So it was with

interest that I learned last week that 10 new Welsh words had been added to the Oxford English Dictionary. This includes, Taid (Grandfather in North Wales) as well as Mam-gu and Tad-gu (Grandma and Grandpa in South Wales), Iechyd Da (Cheers!), Cawl (a sort of soup), Sglods (I word I don't really like, for chips), Twp (stupid), Senedd (Parliament), and Ych a fi! the meaning of the last mentioned which I'll come to now.

It was the first week of September, 1983, and my first day as the new teacher of English as a Second Language at Cannons High School in Stanmore, London Borough of Harrow. I was standing in the dining queue with Roger Lewis (a teacher and musician from Watford) when I heard 'Ych a fi!' an exclamation of disgust from behind me. A smallish man, bearded and wearing the obligatory brown tweed jacket, was looking aghast at the offerings of the day. To me, the food didn't look too bad, but when I tasted it I was to agree with Pete Davies, head of the DT Department, and locally born, London Welshman. Despite being brought up in the capital, this was something that was evidently said quite often at home!

Unlike the French and the Italians, we do not have an Academy to police the English language. For this reason, we accept and assimilate words and phrases of foreign origin easily into the vernacular leading, as suggested, to the range and beauty of the English vocabulary. Whilst this can sometimes be somewhat painful (think, the deluge of Americanisms over the years) I believe it overall to be a positive and enriching stance to take, and one which, far from somehow watering down the language, helps to ensure its future existence.