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GERMAN *IRRWISCH* '1. WILL-O'-THE-WISP; 2. SCAMP, SCALLYWAG, IMP' AND POLISH *URWIS* 'SCAMP, SCALLYWAG, IMP'

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Abstract

Even if the derivation of the meaning 'scamp, scallywag, imp' < 'will-o'-the-wisp' is generally imaginable (albeit not self-evident) it is assumed here that this change is actually based on addition of a foreign meaning to a German one, rather than on semantic evolution.

The morphological structure of the German word *Irrwisch* causes no problems at all: < *Irr+wisch*, like *Irr+licht* 'will-o'-the-wisp, ghost-lights'. One grows all the more convinced about the correctness of this simple etymology if one realizes that German *Wisch* both etymologically and semantically corresponds to English *wisp* 'bundle of hay, rags, etc. for use as a torch'. The only thing that is somewhat less self-evident here is how the meaning 'scamp etc.' has come into being. The change of 'will-o'-the-wisp' into 'scamp' is admittedly imaginable but far from being natural and granted. Let us put this problem aside for a while and have a look at the other word called in the title of this note.

Polish *urwis* 'scamp etc.' and its older and dialectal variants *urwisz* ~ *urwiś* id. are commonly connected with the verb *urw-ać* 'to tear off'. In S.B. Linde's six-volume dictionary of the Polish language (1807–1814) one can also find (s.v. *urwa*) some other derivatives of this verb explained in Polish and translated into German, e.g. *urw-alec* 'ein Beutelschneider, Betrüger [= cut-purse, fraud]', *urw-aniec* 'ein Galgenvogel, Galgenstrick [= gallows bird]', *urw-ański* 'spitzbübisch, räuberisch [= impish, roguish, brigandish]'. Additionally the variant *urowieś* 'scamp etc.'

is attested there, too, which presumably results from a contamination of *urwiś* id. with *obwieś* ‘gallows bird, rogue’.

The semantic connection between ‘scamp etc.’ and ‘to tear off’ is readily understood if one considers the German translation ‘Beutelschneider’ [= English ‘cut-purse’] and another Polish word, i.e. *urwipoleć* ‘scamp etc.’, lit. ‘tear off (*urw-i-*) + large cut of meat or fat (*poleć*)’, i.e. ‘someone who tears off a portion of meat (and runs away)’. Cf. also English *tearaway* ‘madcap, reckless person’.

Before we come back to the German *Irrwisch* we should maybe cast a glance at a still other word: German *dalli* ‘pronto’, *dalli dalli!* ‘hurry up!, get a move on!’. It is unanimously reported to have come from Polish *dalej* ‘1. farther; 2. go ahead!’. This explanation is principally correct; however, the German word-final *-i* clearly points to the Polish dialectal pronunciation: *daléj* (with *é* = narrow [e]) ~ *dali* ~ *dali* (whereas the double *-ll-* in the German spelling is nothing but an orthographical device signaling the shortness of the preceding vowel). It was certainly Polish maidservants or nursemaids who – when taking care of children in German families – used this word in their Polish dialectal pronunciation that afterwards took root in the German language.

A similar scenario can be conjectured for the word *Irrwisch* as well. In the first phase, its meaning was just ‘will-o’-the-wisp’. Then, however, some Polish maidservants might have called the one or another child in a German family *urwisz* or *urwiś* ‘scamp etc.’. The variant with *-ś* sounds softer, gentler, tenderer, and this is the form a loving mother or nursemaid can use when speaking a Polish dialect. Anyway, the difference between Polish *-sz* and *-ś* must have been neutralized in the German pronunciation, always resulting in *-sch*,¹ so that both *urwiś* and *urwisz* yielded a German **Urwisch*.

It is quite possible that such a word was auditively associated by German parents with *Irrwisch* ‘will-o’-the-wisp’,² the more so as **Urwisch* would have been understood in German as ‘proto-wisp’ which makes no sense. A very active child having a lot of energy was sometimes called *Quirl* ‘live wire’ in German, that is with a noun whose etymological meaning was ‘stirring’ ~ ‘turner’, and in this case it is also imaginable that such a child could have been associated with a ‘will-o’-the-wisp’. It might have been in this manner that the German word *Irrwisch* has received its second meaning ‘scamp, scallywag, imp’.

¹ The same is valid for Polish *cz* ~ *ć* > German *tsch*, e.g. Polish *Częstochowa* > German *Tschenstochau*, Polish *Bogucice* [-ući-] (a district of Katowice) > German *Bogutschütz*. Interestingly enough, Polish *cz* was sometimes rendered *sch* in German, as in Polish *Czechowice* > German *Schechowitz*, Polish *Czarków* > German *Scharkow*.

² Etymologically incorrect associations are of course quite usual in language contacts. Another interesting German-Slavonic example is *Podvihov* (name of a district of the Czech city Opava), that rendered in German *Podwihof*, i.e. with the change of Slavonic *-hov* (< thematic *-h* + suffix *-ov*) into German *Hof* ‘yard; courtyard’. – A combination of the Polish *ś* > German *sch* change with a secondary association can also be observed in the name of the Polish village *Sieroty* [še-] (Silesia) whose German equivalent is *Schieroth*, with German *sch-* for Polish *ś-* and German *roth* ‘red’.