HAUNTING VOCABULARY AND CELTIC LEXICOGRAPHY: TOWARDS A TAXONOMY OF GHOST WORDS[1]

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ABSTRACT

Most Humanities scholars probably have an intuitive sense of what is meant by a "ghost word" – it is a word that, in one way or another, exists as the result of someone's unrecognized mistake. However, upon closer examination it becomes clear that the term is liable to be employed so broadly that important distinctions can be lost. For one thing, ghost words are often regarded simply as nuisances that should be deleted whenever they are detected. But in practice they often prove to be too useful simply to discard: this article presents some examples that have made their way into active usage among the Celts. In other cases the etymology may indeed be unnatural, but turns out to be the result of more than a hint of deliberate word-crafting right from the start. A taxonomy is here proposed that distinguishes true ghost words and dead words, on the one hand, from active items that may be described as poltergeist words and even Frankenstein words on the other.

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1. Scribal errors *versus* genuine variants

As all scholars of textual philology are aware, whenever a weird word-form is detected in an originally manuscript piece of writing a particular question must immediately be faced: is the form a scribal error, or is it a genuine variant of what might have been expected? The best distinction I have heard between these was made in a throwaway remark by the late Bengt Löfstedt during a lecture at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, Western Michigan as long ago as 1991: "a genuine variant", said Professor Löfstedt, "is something that someone, at some stage, thought was OK". In contrast with that, scribal errors are forms that even the writers responsible would have disowned, and possibly corrected, if they had had their attention drawn to them. Errors of this kind thus typically include such phenomena, delightful to palaeographers, as dittography, haplography, homoeoteleuton, or the copying of one letter as another due to the scribe's misreading. In the case of any given example of any one of these, if no-one at any stage has consciously "thought it was OK", then it will probably not have survived past the one manuscript in which it is found: in any downstream copies of the text, including (as a final backstop) any modern edition thereof, it will rightly enough have been corrected away. This word, then, is dead; it has not even achieved the status of ghosthood. The first step into our shadowy hierarchy, however, brings us to ghost words that are worthy of the name.

2. True ghost words

True ghost words are erroneous forms that have lived on, through successive copyings and even sometimes into editions, because someone at some stage has actively "thought they were OK", or at least has not realized that they were originally mistakes. Mistakes they were, though; and if during the various copyings they have remained inert, embedded in their original contexts and found only there, then they are what I am regarding as true ghost words: phantoms that, once detected, should be "busted"' by correction in any subsequent edition and, above all, not admitted into a dictionary. That latter consideration means that a particular responsibility lies with lexicographers, as the gatekeepers. As a result one sometimes comes across a comprehensive sweeping-up operation by one of these; an example is that conducted for Irish by the late Tomás de Bhaldraithe in the form of an article published thirty years ago,[2] in which he identified and consigned to the verbal dustbin several dozen false forms accidentally generated by the work of the great antiquarian Edward Lhuyd.[3]

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[2]   De Bhaldraithe (1989).
[3]   Lhuyd (1707).

Such a cleaning-up procedure is all very well in cases where it is sufficiently clear what the mistake has been. Often, however, it is not clear; and in such instances one cannot be sure that a mistake in fact exists. We may suspect it, typically because there is only one example of the word – it is a case of *hapax legomenon* – and there is no obvious etymology; but maybe what we have is nevertheless a genuine lexeme, and in that case it is the lexicographer's duty to ensure that it finds inclusion in the dictionary, albeit in a carefully quarantined state. A medieval example that comes to mind from an insular Latin source is the strange noun in the sentence *Hic ... semirute yxerwrde scintillam laudabiliter excitauit*, "This man praiseworthily fanned up the spark of the half-ruined *yxerwrda*". The sentence is from a twelfth-century annal in the *Historia prioratus Lanthoniae*, an account of Llanthony priory in Monmouthshire.[4] The context is Roger of Norwich's reforming efforts, and it is clear that the sentence refers metaphorically to his activities in connection with the priory: he was restoring some decayed aspect of the institution. Exactly what this aspect was, however, we cannot say; as a Cambro-Latin text, the *Historia* has come to be excerpted both by my project, the Dictionary of Medieval Latin from Celtic Sources (DMLCS),[5] and by our sister venture, the British Academy's now-complete dictionary of mainly Anglo-Latin (DMLBS);[6] and neither of us has been able to make anything of *yxerwrde*. In both teams we suspect it is a ghost, but it is one that for now needs to be recorded and, as it were, monitored; thus it duly appears in each of our dictionaries, but is fenced in with any number of cautionary dagger-signs and question-marks.

3. Poltergeist words

A step further into the phantom world brings us to items that might conventionally still be known as ghost words (because their origins lie in mistakes), but which display an important difference from the one we have just looked at. This is because each of them was at some stage not only positively "thought by someone to be OK", but was then plucked out of its original context and began to have new, active use made of it. Were these real words? They were now! – and in some cases they have subsequently begun to make their presence felt in a serious way in whatever language has been involved, getting freshly used and reused and even elbowing their way to the top of the register of uses. For our present purposes I am calling them poltergeist words

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[4]   Richter (1977-1978) at 128 (my translation).
[5]   The elements of this dictionary published to date are Harvey and Power (2005), and Harvey and Malthouse (2015).
[6]   Latham, Howlett and Ashdowne (1975-2013).

because, having once been raised, they have sometimes gone on to make a lot of noise! The reader's indulgence is requested if I begin with an English-language example, as it is an excellent one for illustrating what I mean; the word is **culprit**, which is, of course, by now a mainstream, perfectly standard item of vocabulary. Its first recorded use is in the trial of the Earl of Pembroke for murder in 1678, and seemingly results from the running together of two separate words, one of them an abbreviation, found in notes that were made at the time. In response to the prisoner's plea of not guilty, the Clerk of the Court had replied formulaically in Old French (this still being the official language for such things in England at that time). The words he had used were *culpable* (as in "yes you are guilty!"), followed by an indication that, for prosecuting the case, he was indeed *prit* (in modern French *pret*); namely, ready. His utterance was duly noted down as the abbreviation *cul.* plus *prit*, and this was later interpreted as having been a one-word, condemnatory epithet addressed to the accused.[7]

As for examples of poltergeists from texts of Celtic interest, a Hiberno-Latin one comes from the ninth-century Carolingian court scholar Iohannes Scottus Eriugena ("John the Irish-born Gael") in his commentary work[8] on the celebrated text *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* by the early fifth-century author Martianus Capella;[9] it arises when John fails to recognize that his Martianus text is faulty at a certain point (so that in this case he is the someone who "thinks it is OK"). In proceeding to interpret straightforwardly what he finds, he actually lets the ghost loose: the word is **excolicus**, of which Eriugena thinks he has found a neuter instance, namely *excolicum*, in his copy of the Martianus text.[10] Now, the well-known Latin word **incola** has always meant an inhabitant, and the prefix **ex**- is the opposite of **in**-; so John arrives logically enough at the understanding that *excolicum* must therefore refer to something alien or (in the context) not of this world. John then makes the word his own by going on to explain that, in pagan times, *excolici* had been divinities worshipped outside this world, whereas those who were cultivated down here had been mere demigods.[11] However, the word *excolicum* in the text that John is using was a misreading all the time, namely for the two standard Latin words *et scholicum*

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7   *Oxford English dictionary*, s.v. **culprit** (accessed 25 November 2019).
8   Lutz (1939).
9   Dick (1925).
10 Throughout this contribution the important distinction is maintained between lexemes (that is, distinct semantic items that would consequently appear as discrete headwords in a dictionary and that are here represented in **bold**) on the one hand and, on the the hand, particular instances or occurrences of any such lexeme – or references to what it represents – which are here rendered in *italics.*
11 Lutz (1939) at 88.

in Martianus Capella's original.[12] By investing the misreading with a life of its own, namely by repeating it in his own sentence of would-be explanation, John has unwittingly – as is always the way – stirred what was until that moment merely a ghost word into poltergeistly action.

A beautiful, modern example of the same phenomenon, but coming from within the realm of the Celtic languages in the strict sense, is one that I owe to the kindness of the deservedly renowned emeritus Professor William Gillies, from Edinburgh. Professor Gillies recalls[13] a teacher from the school he attended in Oban telling of the time a lad in the Gàidhlig class had puzzled him with his translation of "The boy went" as *Dh'irreg an gille*. The definite article, the noun, and the prefixed past-tense marker seemed not too problematic; but what about the verb itself? Then the teacher realized that the lad had looked up the dictionary under "go", and had duly found this:

Go V[erb] Irreg.

The teacher (and subsequently the professor) went on to tell the story; but the lad ended up as the Convenor of Argyll Council's Education Committee!

3.1 More active poltergeists

At least in those Celtic examples the first active user of the poltergeist word seems also to have been the last: no-one other than Eriugena has composed a sentence using **excolicus**, and no-one except the boy in Oban has tried to conjugate the verb **irreg**. The poltergeist has remained in a single room.[14] But what about any accidental Celtic coinings that have been actively adopted by other users than their originators, so that they have become poltergeists endemic to the whole house of their language, like **culprit** in English? One such word in

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[12]   Dick (1925) at 151.
[13]   Gillies (pers. comm.)
[14]   These examples show that, as one of my anonymous reviewers points out, "all it takes for a 'true' ghost word to begin to take on poltergeist status is for one author or copier to interpret it in a new way". Nevertheless, that this is indeed the correct place to draw the distinction between the two categories is shown by the fact that the small act of reinterpretation in question is, in linguistic terms, the sole necessary condition enabling an item that would otherwise inevitably remain a mere ghost to grow into its full potential role as a ubiquitous item of vocabulary, as with English **culprit** and the Celtic examples that now follow. (Whether any particular item, once reinterpreted, does so grow or not is a secondary issue dependent upon multiple contingencies that include a perceived need for the word, and a vector by which it can become widely known to its potential users; how these considerations can play out in practice is illustrated in connection with each example discussed.)

Irish is **dialann**, a diary. Everybody has one of these (or did have until the advent of electronic devices); but we really ought not, for the word began not just as a ghost, but as a misunderstood one (a sad spirit, as one might say). In the year 1662, when compiling a Latin-to-Irish glossary under the title *Vocabularium Latinum et Hibernum*, Risteard Pluincéad wished to translate into Irish the Latin word **diarium**, meaning provisions for a day. He therefore coined a transparent compound **dia-lón** (that is, **dia**, one of the Irish words for a day, plus **lón** "sustenance"), and wrote it opposite the Latin original in his list. However, when Edward Lhuyd subsequently drew upon Pluincéad's work – then, and still, unpublished; it is manuscript Z.4.2.5 in Marsh's Library, Dublin – he evidently understood the Latin word **diarium** in what had always been the other sense that it possessed. That other sense is "a diary or day book", which Lhuyd goes on to give in his own, Irish-to-English dictionary of 1707 (referred to above) as the definition of Pluincéad's Irish word (which he spells *dialon*). Crucially, citation of the Latin itself gets dropped in the process; so it is only if one is aware of Lhuyd's use of Pluincéad that the semantic dislocation becomes apparent. Furthermore, by the time the Irish word came to be treated by the great lexicographer Patrick Dinneen one sees not only that the latter was still oblivious of the fact that a change of meaning had taken place (since he defines the word merely by repeating Lhuyd) but also that, by his time, the appropriate spelling was felt to be one that simply reflected a pronunciation /dˈiːələN/ (this indeed being how one might read out Lhuyd's form *dialon*, but only if one were unconscious of its etymology). The misconceived new spelling in question, namely *dialann*,[15] together with the mistaken definition "diary, day-book", consequently represents all that survives of Pluincéad's original coining in what is the most influential dictionary of Irish ever to have been published.[16] However, that being uncontestedly the status of Dinneen's work – and even though by now the true story of the word in question has long been well known[17] – it is unthinkable that **dialann**, with its extremely useful (if historically illegitimate) current meaning, will ever now be ousted from its position as part of the basic vocabulary of modern Irish.

Another nice poltergeist word in Irish is **cigire**, now known to millions – literally – because it has become the standard word for an inspector, and so is familiar to every Irish person from their schooldays. In this case, however, the word's questionable history was already known to Dinneen, whose dictionary

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[15]   This "standardized" form shows the vowel in the final syllable, whose original length had already been lost track of in Lhuyd's *dialon*, duly rendered in the normal Irish way with the letter *a* (representing the schwa /ə/); and MacNeill's Law applied (or else the element **-lann** falsely detected) so as to delenite the final consonant, which is consequently spelled *nn*.

[16]   Dinneen (1927), s.v. **dialann**.

[17]   De Bhaldraithe (1959) at v, n. 2.

calls it a "spurious word";[18] nevertheless, the great lexicographer goes on to concede the item's status as "now in common use", and certainly makes no move to delete it. It seemingly began as an invention by Tadhg Ua Neachtain who, in Lhuyd's vocabulary of 1707, had seen *cíghim* (correctly defined there as meaning "to see or behold") but misread it as *cigim*, and went on to generate related forms **cigireacht** and *cigirim* alongside **cigire** in his own, unpublished Irish-English dictionary of 1739.[19] The first of these spin-offs, the abstract **cigireacht**, has for its part also been adopted into active Irish as the word for an inspection or the office of inspector; the proposed verbal (?) form *cigirim* seems, however, not to have made the grade.[20]

If a poltergeist word goes into active circulation then a descriptive dictionary should register it because it is the lexicographer's duty to record every word that has been actively used in the relevant language, no matter how suspect its etymology. For its part a prescriptive dictionary, engaged as it may be with language revitalization or revival,[21] may well do the same: the word has probably caught on exactly because it answers a felt need among the users of the language concerned, and the lexicographer may wish to endorse that. A nice example from revived Cornish is the word for music, namely **ilow**. Speakers of Welsh or Breton will immediately be struck by this, because it is so unlike their own **cerddoriaeth** and **sonerezh**; but it is somewhat less cumbersome than these, and in any case whatever was the traditional Cornish word for music has not survived, so **ilow** is now the uncontested standard. It is adopted by major dictionaries such as Ken George's, even though the word's weird history has by now been fully traced and is a matter of record; indeed, it is within Dr George's entry for **ilow** that he spells out just what that history is, by means of a long commentary note.[22] Essentially there is in Welsh a word **lluwch**, meaning spray; and it seems that traditional Cornish must have contained a cognate of it, because the dialect word **lew**, referring to a fine mist rising from the water, has long been known and appears in, for example, the great Robert Morton Nance's *Glossary of Cornish sea words*.[23] A different dialect term for a mist, but this time clearly English-based, is the noun **muzzick**. Now it was apparently as late as the 1920s that a recorder of the respected St Ives Old Cornwall Society officially equated **lew**, transparently Celtic in origin as it was, with the English-based word **muzzick**. Crucially, however, he spelled the latter word *music*; also

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18   Dinneen (1927) s.v. **cigire**.
19   See De Bhaldraithe (1959) at v, n. 2.
20   I am grateful to my colleague Dr Charles Dillon, of the Royal Irish Academy's Foclóir Stairiúil na Nua-Ghaeilge project, for helping to clarify the status of these words.
21   A helpful guide to the distinction between these terms is provided by Lewin (2017) at 97.
22   George (2009) s.v. **ilow.**
23   Nance (1963).

he seemingly failed to state what either item meant. Free of any context in the resulting document except the explicit equation with the little-known *lew*, it can therefore only have been a matter of time before the recorder's form *music* got read and pronounced as if it were the more common English word. Once it also came to be understood as such, the confusion that ensued as to the meaning of its Celtic companion too was probably inevitable but, as George suggests, "this is a case where the need for a Cor[nish] word and the widespread actual use of … **ilow** [for music] overrule the fact that the word has no real basis".[24]

3.2 Poltergeist words and folk etymology

If **cigire** arose as the result of a misreading and **ilow** as the result of a mispronunciation, what about ghost and even poltergeist words (there are many) whose origins lie in misanalyses? By this I mean the false identification of the etymological elements that make up a legitimate word – the syndrome known as folk etymology. Consider the term in different Celtic languages for a college or, originally, a cathedral-chapter. In each case the base word is Latin **collegium**. The most austere, purist borrowing of that is the one that is now standard in Welsh, namely **coleg**; in this, the final consonant is the simple guttural stop [g], as in the original Latin. In contrast with that the palatalized pronunciation of the letter *g* as [dž], which developed post-Classically in Latin words such as the one in question, is reflected in the Scottish Gàidhlig borrowing **colaidse** and, with typical Celtic metathesis, in the Irish **coláiste**.[25] But it is in traditional Cornish that some reanalysis may have been at work: the vernacular *Life* of St Meriasek, as committed to writing in 1504,[26] attests the word four times as *colgy*.[27] As is indicated by its spelling in all of the orthographies used for Revived Cornish,[28]

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24 The initial vowel in **ilow** results from a subsequent, separate mistake, of a different kind and not relevant here; the details are given by George (2009) in the commentary note referred to above.

25 Welsh also has by-forms such as *colets*, *colaets*, *colej*, and *colaij*, some of which go back at least as far as **coleg** itself but reflect the developed pronunciation; see Thomas et al. (1950-2002) s.vv. **coleg** and **colets**, where the by-forms are explained as borrowings from English **college** (which of course also has [dž]). The same origin may in fact apply to the Gaelic words; but the English lexeme itself derives from the Latin, and for present purposes it does not matter in which of these two possible donor languages the palatalization had occurred (in no case can it have taken place *after* the borrowing into the particular Celtic language involved, since it is not a process that ever eventuated within any of the four Celtic tongues mentioned in the present paragraph).

26 Under the Latin title *Ordinale de Meradoc episcopi et confessoris* this text is preserved in Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales MS Peniarth 105.

27 George (2009) s.v. **kollji**.

28 Antedating the Kernewek Kemmyn spelling adopted by George (see n. 27) there was the Unified Cornish **coljy** of Nance (1955) s.v. More recently, **kolji** has been established as the

this will have had the [dž] sound; and it seems unlikely to be a coincidence that, in Cornish specifically, **-ji** is a common suffix designating a house (so that **melinji** is a mill-house, **klavji** is a hospital or invalid-house, and so on). For someone in Cornwall to have viewed a college or chapter as a kind of specialist house, and the word designating it as containing an element indicating that fact in its etymology, seems entirely reasonable. Or take another step up the register. The Classical Latin name for the city of Athens, namely **Athenae**, being duly pronounced in Ireland in the expected Hibernian fashion as [a:θiənə] (subsequently [a:hiənə]),[29] at some stage got interpreted as a phrase of two words of which the second began with a lenited and therefore silent *f*, and so was explained as meaning the Ford of the Champions, or their combat-site. We know this because a form of the Latin spelled *Atene* is duly interpreted as *āth F(h)íana* in some probably fifteenth-century Irish glossing on a particular list of Latin words and names.[30] Again, this would have seemed reasonable enough; after all, everyone knew that fords were where the heroic warriors of old had indeed conducted their one-on-one battles.

3.3 The sea-cat

The example of the sea-cat – *an cat mara* – will probably be a favourite for anyone who has read *An béal bocht*, the satirical novel first published in 1941 by Brian Ó Nualláin (writing as Myles na gCopaleen). Here the animal in question is a hideous monster that comes ashore in Ireland by night and, to impoverished coastal communities, heralds disasters that are described (in Patrick C. Power's inspired translation, originally of 1973) as being worse than "the final explosion of the great earth".[31] Ó Nualláin was, of course, far too wily to have made this episode up from scratch, his image of the creature clearly having been drawn from "the monstrous sea-cats of Irish tradition";[32] the pursuit of these to their source, however, proves to be much complicated by the evidence. Sinister maritime felines are found in medieval traditions from Wales (and indeed Iceland) as well as from Ireland, and Rachel Bromwich did not feel able to conclude more definitely than that, ultimately, they "appear to be of

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Standard Written Form (SWF): see Akademi Kernewek (2019) s.v., accessed 7 November 2019. On the nomenclature used in the present note see Davies-Deacon (2017).

29   On the assimilation of Latin pronunciation to Celtic sound-systems in the Middle Ages see Harvey (1990).

30   Stokes (1860) at 12; the glossary in question is preserved in Trinity College Dublin MS 1315.

31   See Power (1986) at 116, translating *críochphléascadh an domhain mhóir* (the standardized spelling of the phrase, as found in later editions of *An béal bocht* such as Ó Nualláin (1986) at 108).

32   The expression is that of Bromwich (1961) at 485.

Celtic origin".[33] Within this parameter, and viewed simply in terms of the chronological sequence of what survives, the earliest examples of monstrous cats associated in some way with the sea do in fact appear to come from Wales: for example, Cath Palug (Palug's cat), one of the "three scourges of Anglesey", swims the Menai Strait at the end of the twenty-sixth of the *Trioedd Ynys Prydain* ("Triads of the Island of Britain"),[34] a compendium "preserved in a number of manuscripts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries" but probably "first brought together during the twelfth",[35] whereas for Ireland the explicit trail begins with a passage preserved in two fourteenth-century Oxford Rawlinson manuscripts, B.485 and B.505.[36] The passage in question there, however, forms part of a Hiberno-Latin version of St Brendan's *Life and voyage*.[37] This is well known as a particularly multilayered part of the Brendan dossier,[38] which is itself enormously complex: it involves at least one Hiberno-Latin text from possibly as long ago as the eighth century[39] and indications of borrowings in and out of Irish-language analogues from possibly before that,[40] as well as subsequently going on to have a multilingual and almost pan-European range of reflexes.[41] So a purely positivistic approach, treating the chronology of the texts that we have as if they constituted the whole corpus of Brendan material that ever existed, is unlikely to give a true picture of the development of any particular element within it. Instead, a more fruitful tactic may be to think in terms of motivation: in the present instance, to ask why a sea-monster should ever have been envisaged as taking the form of a giant cat, of all animals, especially considering that cats stereotypically loathe the water and despise swimming. It turns out that philological considerations furnish a

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[33]   Bromwich (1961) at 486.

[34]   Bromwich (1961) at 45-54.

[35]   Stephens (1986) at 598.

[36]   The latter is a copy of the former, but more complete; taking them together one can reconstruct the so-called Codex Oxoniensis *al.* Insulensis; see Ó Corráin (2017), vol. 1 at 315-317 (no. 241).

[37]   Plummer (1910), vol. 1 at 98-151; see Lapidge and Sharpe (1985) at 120 (no. 441).

[38]   It is nearly a century since Kenney (1929) at 413 pointed out that the conflation of two pre-existing texts so as to produce the one in question "has resulted in the preservation of much material sacrificed by other compilers".

[39]   This is the *Nauigatio S. Brendani*, one of the constituent parts of the *Life and voyage* just mentioned; see the bibliography in Lapidge and Sharpe (1985) at 105-106 (no. 362). The *Nauigatio*'s date remains contentious, nothing more definite having yet been agreed than that it is "a Hiberno-Latin narrative of the immram tale-type, composed possibly as early as the 8th and not later than the 10th cent[ury]"; see Welch (1996) at 390.

[40]   See, for example, Mac Mathúna (1985) at 281-282.

[41]   The *Nauigatio* itself has been described as "one of the most influential texts of the Middle Ages, … contained in over 100 manuscript copies in Latin and … translated into most (*sic*) European vernaculars"; see Welch (1996) at 390.

plausible solution.[42] In the episode from the *Life and voyage*, the saint and his companions have been warned to get away from an island in their boat as quickly as they can, because the sea-cat has a lair there. As they do so, *ecce post se uident bestiam illam per mare natantem, et oculos ita magnos habentem in modum uasis uitrei* ("behold, they see the said monster swimming after them through the sea, with eyes enormous like a vessel of glass").[43] The monks duly pray about this, at which another beast rises from the depths and attacks the sea-cat. The two creatures sink fighting into the abyss and are not seen again. But still: why specifically a cat? An Irish-language version of the tale, found first in the late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century Book of Lismore,[44] evidently gives the game away when, for the sea-cat, we find it coining the straightforward compound word **murchat**.[45] The point is that in the Latin the word used for the creature is not a similar compound with **feles** (the Classical Latin word for a cat), nor indeed with **cattus**, which replaced it in the later language. Rather, what appears is a fairly widespread epithet or nickname, literally meaning a mouse-catcher. This epithet is made up of an element **-ceps**, meaning one who takes or catches, grafted onto the normal Latin word for a mouse or rat, which is **mus.** Significantly, the oblique stem of that latter word, which is the one used for compounding, is *muri-*; so a mouse-catcher is a *muriceps*. Following a lead given by Plummer in his edition,[46] I think we can see what has happened here. In Romance languages, and in Latin itself, the word for the sea has an unrounded vowel; thus Latin or Italian **mare**, French **mer**, etc. In Celtic generally the vowel is (historically, at least) rounded,[47] as in Welsh **môr**; but specifically in the Gaelic world, and there alone, it is spelled with a *u*: the Old Irish word for the sea is **muir**. So in the linguistic world of Ireland where the St Brendan legend took shape, *but only there*, anyone reading an earlier Latin version of the tale and coming across the Latin word **muriceps**, and seeing from the context that it did refer to some sort of cat, would be liable to analyse its nickname as meaning not a humble mouse-catcher, but as the Catcher in the Sea. If that is indeed what happened, then the temptation to add, to the island-based part of the tale, the account of the subsequent pursuit across the

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[42] I am grateful to Professor Jonathan Wooding (pers. comm.) for his validation and endorsement of this approach. My thanks go also to Professor Marged Haycock for raising the matter of the Welsh parallel and for a similarly supportive conversation subsequently.

[43] Plummer (1910), vol. 1 at 138 (my translation).

[44] On this manuscript see Ó Corráin (2017), vol. 2 at 1101-1104 (no. 833).

[45] Stokes (1890) at 113.

[46] Plummer (1910), vol. 1 at 138 (n. 4).

[47] The same is true in the Slavic tongues, for example Polish **morze**.

ocean would have been almost irresistible.[48] Here we see what monstrous results can, at least potentially, proceed from a simple misunderstanding – or, as perhaps we should rather say, "disunderstanding".

4. The concept of "disunderstanding" and the generation of Frankenstein words

I have coined the word "disunderstanding" on the model of **disinformation**, a term from the world of counter-intelligence which refers to building up a picture of a situation that is not only misleading but is deliberately so.[49] In three articles so far published I have traced how Irish authors as far back as the seventh century would purposefully apply their technique of disunderstanding to an established phrase consisting of a few words and, by parsing the grammar in a manner different from the author's intention, would make the phrase mean something new.[50] They would then pluck out the word whose meaning had thus been changed, and use it in a sentence of their own devising – this being how we become aware of it. They did this in Latin, or in Irish, or in a combination of the two, in which case the key sometimes lay in analysing a word, or individual parts of it, in one of these languages as if it were in the other. An increasing amount of scholarship is being published on this tendency as manifested in the medieval Irish synthetic glossarial tradition.[51] It is present in the example of the sea-cat, if in fact the person first responsible for analysing the etymology as containing the Irish word for sea rather than the Latin word for mouse had some awareness of the real situation, as may well have been the case. But in that event, what has he done? His word is not just a ghost word, as he goes on to use it actively as arguably the underlying motivator for the whole episode of the pursuit. If there was any artifice or craft in the generation of the term then it is not even merely a poltergeist word, because that too would have required the origin to lie in a definite mistake. Instead, for portmanteau words that result from a deliberate, creative disunderstanding and re-engineering of etymological elements I would suggest the term Frankenstein words. After all, in Mary Shelley's novel the experimenter Victor Frankenstein uses skill and artifice as he attempts to create a being that will not only live but will be beautiful.[52] Numerous instances of the same enterprise can be cited from within writings by

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48 I am encouraged by Professor Wooding's comment (pers. comm.) that one might legitimately go on to use this observation to gain fresh leverage on the vexed question of the true relative chronology of the medieval text-passages involved.

49 *Oxford English dictionary*, s.v. **disinformation** (accessed 22 November 2019).

50 Harvey (2015); Harvey (2016); Harvey (2018).

51 It is probably fair to say that, at the time of writing, these efforts have culminated in those of Moran (2019).

52 Shelley (1831).

Celts, as well as others,[53] from the seventh century onwards; however, requirements of space limit me to simply providing the best example of the Frankenstein category that I have found to date. By contrast with the sea-cat example, this one has purely monolingual roots: it emerged in late 2017 during the preparation of the letter *L* in the DMLCS office, and is the word **lusculus** – seemingly unknown to any existing dictionary. Like many such items, the word occurs just once; but this one instance is clearly no mistake, and achieves exactly what was intended by its author. That author is the enigmatic seventh-century Hibernian wordsmith who calls himself Virgilius Maro Grammaticus,[54] and the word occurs within a polite signing-off passage at the very end of his book of *Epistole*: he commends to us his *lusculi*, expressing the modest hope that they "may edify rather than harm the reader".[55] So far, so conventional – provided we can work out what his *lusculi* actually are! Upon examination, the context shows that they are a phenomenon that the reader will have encountered on multiple occasions whilst perusing Virgilius' book, while the splendidly double (and therefore artificial) etymology of the word in fact tells us everything else we need to know. The word **lusculus** is clearly a diminutive, as its termination shows: but is this termination the frequently encountered -**culus** (so embracing all five of the final letters), leaving just the opening *lus-* as the stem that carries the meaning? Or is the diminutive ending simply the final -**ulus** (which is equally common),[56] in which case the letter *c* belongs instead to the stem and what we have as the base for the diminutive is the word **luscus**? The answer is surely both: this is Virgilius Maro Grammaticus writing, and he was the verbal Victor Frankenstein of his age. He has been verbally stitching and pasting throughout his work and when here, in his final paragraph, he alludes to what he has been doing, he does so by means of a word that embodies in itself the enterprise in which he has been engaged. For if the underlying noun is taken as **lusus**, then a *lusculus* is a little game or subterfuge. But if the basic form is **luscus,** then a *lusculus* is a minor obscurity, or enigma. The thing is a deliberate pun[57] – and in fact more than that. Not only is our author's verbal

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[53]   As regards the kind of Frankenstein words that result from treating an element in one language as if it were in another, an anonymous reviewer describes the interlingual word play involved as "well attested in all instances of language contact past and present".

[54]   On Virgilius and his writings – and indeed his possibly Jewish-Hibernian identity – see Harvey (2014).

[55]   Polara (1979) at 328 (*mei quoque lusculi … plus aedificent quam noceant lectorem*).

[56]   On the Latin suffixes **-culus** and **-ulus** see, for example, Kennedy (1962) at 210.

[57]   The most finely crafted pun in any language is arguably one that, in each of its meanings, is well formed according to the rules of that language (and so is not forced), and does not require knowledge of any other language in order to work fully. The word **lusculus** fulfils these criteria for Latin to the extent that, as the anonymous reviewer remarks, "even if it is not attested in ancient sources, this ... might have elicited the same kinds of groans as many puns today!"

creation **lusculus** a one-word riddle; the answer to it is, as it were, the word "riddle". As is the case surprisingly often in these texts the puzzle is its own solution, playing the game its own reward.

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