

GERMANIC *GABBEN*, OLD FRENCH *GABER*, ENGLISH *GAB*: HEROIC BOASTING AND MOCKERY

Abstract

The numerous Romance and Germanic words exemplified by Old French *gab* 'boast' are traced to an original trans-Rhenan loan of Gaulish **gobbos* 'mouth' to early Germanic. Flyting or stylized verbal contention was a feature of warrior culture in both Celtic and Germanic societies. *Gab* and reflexes were generalized throughout the Germanic world, eventually reaching Normandy and France and thence Britain. **Keywords:** borrowing, flyting, Germanic, Celtic, Old French.

Resumen

Las numerosas palabras romances y germánicas ejemplificadas por el francés medieval *gab* 'alardear' se han trazado a partir del galo original **gobbos* 'boca', que se introdujo como préstamo en el germánico común del otro lado del Rin. El duelo verbal estilizado era un rasgo de la cultura guerrera tanto en la sociedad celta como en la germánica. *Gab* y sus herederas se generalizaron a lo largo del mundo germánico, llegando finalmente a Normandía y Francia, desde donde llegó a Gran Bretaña. **Palabras clave:** préstamos, duelo verbal, germánico, celta, francés medieval.

IN MODERN ENGLISH, *GAB* AS A NOUN HAS A RANGE OF APPARENTLY interrelated meanings: 1) 'mockery, derisive deception; a lie, deceit'; 2) 'conversation, prattle, talk, twaddle'; 3) 'the mouth'; and, semantically farther afield, 4) 'a hook or notch in a rod or lever'. It is also found as a matching verb, *to gab*, as 'to reproach, accuse, speak mockingly, tell lies, deceive, brag, boast; to talk much or glibly' (and, in mechanical terms, 'project', as of the teeth of a gear). In modern French, *gab* and *gaber* have a more restricted semantic range: 'gagueure fanfaronne et plaisante; plaisanterie, facétie, jeu d'esprit' and, with a slightly darker tonality, 'plaisanter, rire, moquer, railler' (both forms now judged 'vieilli'). The overlap between usages in the two languages is apparent and the authoritative lexicographical works from which the above definitions are drawn, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson et al. 1989) and *Le Trésor de la langue française* (Imbs 1974–94), respectively, explain this coincidence by a loan from medieval Norman French, via Anglo-Norman and Anglo-French, into Middle English.¹ The ultimate source of Old Norman and Old French *gab* is identified as Old Norse,

¹ Medieval French forms are most fully exemplified in Baldinger *Dictionnaire étymologique de l'ancien français*: 1974– and include *gab*, *gabe*, *gabele*, *gabement*, *gabance*, *gabeur*, *gaberie*, *gaberise*, *gabois*, *degaber*, and *degabement*.

perhaps more exactly the Old Danish carried by the Northmen to the future Normandy, with the possibility raised that the Norse-colored speech of the British Danelaw may also have contributed to Middle English *gabb*, *gabbe* 'falsehood, deceit; idle talk' and *gabben* 'to lie, practice deceit; to mock' (Kurath et al. *Middle English Dictionary*: 2001). Here we leave the historical dictionaries for a discussion that initially addresses some reservations that may be had about the semantic loose ends left by this relatively simple derivation, which we may schematically represent as Old Norse *gabb* > Old Norman and then standard Old French *gab* and *gaber* > Middle English *gabb*, *gabben* (influenced by early medieval Anglo-Danish?) > early Modern English *gab*, n. and v.

In his etymological dictionary of Old Norse and under the headword *gabb* 'Spott; mockery', Jan de Vries (1977: 151) lists modern Icelandic and Faroese *gabb*, Old Swedish *gab*, and, further to the Old Norse verb *gabba*, Icelandic, Faroese, Old Swedish *gabba*, Old Danish *gabbe*, Middle English *gabben*, Old Frankish *gabba* 'to bring a legal action against someone', Middle Dutch and Middle Low German *gabben* 'to play tricks'.² But are these cognates, with a common Germanic source, or mostly borrowings and, if the latter, from what? De Vries continues with a number of related forms, among which may be mentioned the reiterative forms, Middle Dutch *gabbelen* and New High German *gaffeln*, both 'to laugh, joke', and Old English *gaffetung* 'scoffing, mocking'. In summation de Vries states 'Die reiche entw[icklun]g beweist den germ[anischen] charakter' (1977: 151). But no common Germanic root is advanced nor is there a reference to a possible Indo-European antecedent of the kind reconstructed by Julius Pokorny and his successors (Pokorny 1969, Köbler 1993 and 2000, Rix and Kümmel 2001). Also to be accounted for in a comprehensive solution, although not covered in de Vries's argument, are modern English *gab* 'garrulous speech, mouth' and, to add to the mix, *gob* 'mouth; talk, conversation, language', as a verb, *to gob* 'to prate, brag'.

In the following it is proposed that the various Germanic and Gallo-Romance forms of the *gab* word have a common origin in a much earlier

² De Vries (1962) supports the above derivation of Norman French *gab* from Norse, as do von Kraemer 1967, Baldinger 1974-, and Roper 1999, in the last-named case naming the 'usual suspect', onomatopoeia, as source for the Norse word.

and hitherto unrecognized lexical transfer in the Rhineland between Gaulish and regional Germanic dialects. The larger cultural context is conceptions of honor and face in the aristocratic warrior society of Iron Age Europe, a context illustrated by such better known trans-Rhenan loans from Gaulish to Germanic as terms for ‘king’, ‘servant’, ‘free’, ‘foreigner’, ‘oath’, ‘vow’, ‘hostage’, ‘inheritance’, ‘reproach’, and ‘fear’/‘respect’—as well as the name of the Rhine itself (Ringe 2011).³

Gaulish *uepos* ‘voice, speech’ figures in the Galatian personal name *Uepo-litanos* ‘great-voiced’ and is a suitable attribute in a warrior society (Delamarre, 2003: 313–14). In Gaul are recorded *Acinco-uepus* ‘of unfettered speech’ and *Oepo-peis* ‘rich in words’. In Gaulish *Togi-uepus* ‘axe-voiced’ more than oratorical skills may be implied. *Uepos* and the related *uapos* are derived from the reconstructed Indo-European **uekwos* and the root **uekw-* designating speech and vocalization. Cognates are Latin *uōx*, Greek *épos*, Sanskrit *vāk*, Tocharian B *wek*, and, in other Celtic languages, Welsh *gwep* ‘face’ and *gwaethl* ‘dispute’, Breton *goap*, *goab* ‘mockery, scorn’, and Old Irish *foccul* ‘word’.⁴ So cited, the Celtic forms seem to have a predisposition to designate contentious language: loud, cutting, in-your-face speech, mocking words, dispute. This accords well with the later use of *gab* and *gaber* in Gallo-Romance and, with some attenuation as the heroic world fades, in Middle English *gabben*.

It is proposed that Gaulish *uapos* was assumed into Germanic vocabulary and there complemented native Germanic in what might be called a situational slot as quintessentially exemplified by flyting, the ritual exchange of self-promoting boasts, mockery, and threats between warriors preparing to engage in single combat—unless one is faced down—that we find in the early medieval European epic. The assumption of the vocabulary of the enemy or foreigner is not uncommon. Various social settings can be imagined: the warrior in the company of his peers, bragging and boasting of past and future

³ It is noteworthy that several of the terms that figure prominently in Karl’s essay (2006) are also among the lexical exports to Germanic culture and, we may assume, to new forms of socio-political and economic organization.

⁴ For early attestations of the Breton reflex, see Fleuriot 1983. German derivatives of this root are listed in Köbler 2000, *s.v.* **uek^h-* ‘sprechen’.

deeds; facing his opponent, with insults intended to win a psychological advantage; 'post-game' summaries; even third-party judgments on the vain boasts of the over-confident fighter.

While the semantic development from 'speech' to 'vaunting, mocking speech' in a Gaulish-to-Germanic lexical transfer is plausible in the light of the apparent availability of this range of meaning in Gaulish *uapos*, the phonological adaptation is more problematic. Among the 30-some best known or presumed loans from Celtic into Germanic, none have as initial sound the semi-vowel or bilabial consonant of *uapos* or *uepos* (Ringe 2011). While not a close parallel, the continuation of Gaulish *uebru-* 'amber' in the German river name *Wipper* (Delamarre 2003: 309) suggests that a Germanic adaptation of Gaulish *uapos* would have an initial *w-* sound.

Another of the recognized Gaulish loans into Germanic is *geisslos* 'hostage' (unless the transfer were operative in the opposite direction). The Gaulish term is also found in a compound, *congestlos*, one hostage in an exchange (Delamarre 2003: 124). The prefix *co(n)*, cognate with Latin *cum*, is seen without *-n-* in *co-uinnos* 'war chariot (with two seats)'. A reconstructed form, **co-uapos* 'flyting, exchange of boasts and taunts', is a more satisfactory source of Germanic *gabben* than the simplex *uapos*. This derivation, however, involves substantial speculation and, if projected into Germanic, the likely phonological outcome would have been something like **gawap-* or **gawaf-*.

Early Celtic offers an attractive alternative. A Gaulish **gobbo-* 'mouth, beak' has been reconstructed on the basis of modern French words such as *gober*, *gobelet*, Old French *gobel*, *gobet* 'mouthful' and reflexes in other Celtic languages (Delamarre 2003:182).⁵ *Mouth* in modern English slang as 'abusive retort' illustrates how a body part can serve as metonym for its product.

⁵ *Gobbos* may have primarily referred to animals and birds, and the more general Gaulish term for 'mouth' have been *bocca* (cf. the extension of modern French *gueule* in the slang register from animals to humans, e.g., *gueuler* 'to yell, esp. insults). Names for animals are frequent bases for early Celtic personal names; the roaring of animals or shrieking of raptors may have been associated with *gobbos*. No Celtic reflexes are listed in Pokorny 1959-69, s.v. *gēp(h)-* 'maw, mouth; to eat' or Rix and Kümmel 2001, s.v. *gēb-* 'to eat, chew'.

The transfer from Gaulish to Germanic of a collective term for heroic boasting and mockery would be consonant with these cultures' concern for honor and fame, and with the documented practice of lexical loans. A number of parallels suggest themselves. Gaulish *agedo-* 'appearance, manner, face' has a cognate in Old Irish *agad* that means both 'face' and, figuratively, 'honor' (Delamarre 2003: 34). *Enech* is also found in Old Irish in these two senses, e.g., *enechlóg* 'honor price' (Quin 1912–76), as is its Welsh cognate *wyneb*. 'Saving face' is an English remnant of this widespread equation between an individual's most visible and expressive body part, and his reputation. The notion of name serves the same function in many languages. As a further example of metonymic change, Old Irish also knew *clú* 'fame, reputation' in the sense of what is heard (< IE root **kleu-* 'to hear'). We may compare Gaulish *cluto-* 'famous, celebrated' and the element **bluth-* in early Germanic in personal names.

Although the rhetoric of combat, especially when an opponent is faced down, serves to advance the warrior's worth just as effectively as do physical deeds, martial speech acts were also fraught with risk. If a warrior vowed to accomplish more than he eventually did, inflated his past deeds, or called out an opponent to single combat and then lost his nerve before the first blow was struck, his honor would suffer as grievously as his body might have done. It is not possible to recover the register in which a hypothetical Gaulish form such as *gobbos* would have figured. The later *gab* words, its putative descendant, all seem to have a slightly negative affect. If 'vain boasting' were judged typical of Rhineland Celts, an early Germanic **gabb-* might have been a loan from Gaulish turned back against its erstwhile speakers. The example of Yiddish *chutzpah* taken into English and then used of both Gentiles and Jews comes to mind. It is from this perspective that we must assess the measured comments of Beowulf when first questioned and taunted by Unferth and later in his vows to Hrothgar (Sayers 2009). Perhaps as a consequence, the *gab* words in medieval narrative are often shaded censoriously, figure in negative constructions, or are put in the mouth of judgmental third parties. The concept occurs twice in *La Chanson de Roland*: once when Ganelon seeks to defame Roland by saying he would blow his horn all day in pursuit of a hare and is now probably boasting before his peers: 'Devant ses pers vait il ore gabant' (Duggan 2005:

I.1781) and later when the Saracens hear Charlemagne's bugles respond to Roland's sounding of the horn and know his intended return is no joke or idle boast: 'ne-l tindrent mie en gab' (I.2113).⁶ Flyting, the verbal exchange between prospective combatants, is less well represented in the literary record of the high Middle Ages, as if it belonged to more archaic cultures, yet striking examples are found in the father-son duels between Cú Chulainn and Connlá in Irish and Hildebrand and Hadubrand in German.⁷

The larger European development envisioned here would begin with the above outlined transfer of *gobbos*, less plausibly **couapos*, from Gaulish to Rhineland Germanic to generate a verb that we may figure as Germanic *gabben*. This term then spread into the Germanic warrior cultures of the Atlantic seaboard. Frequentive forms such as Dutch *gabbelen* would follow. It would have been brought to Britain with the Anglo-Saxons and persisted into the Old English period in *gaffetung* 'mockery, scoffing' and perhaps in the adjective *gaf* 'base, vile, lewd' and the noun *gaf* 'buffoonery, idle talk' (see further below). A comparable transfer northward in Europe brought *gabben* to the Scandinavian languages (a development that parallels that of the Gaulish then Germanic term for hostage). Viking raiding, trading, and settlement introduced the word both to Normandy and also quite possibly to the Danelaw. From Norman French, *gab* and *gaber* were generalized in Old French and may have coalesced there with a Frankish-derived homonym. This could have colored Breton *goab* 'mockery' and account for its several differences from Welsh *gwep* 'face' (cf. *gwepian* 'to make faces, grimace; pout, cry, weep'). In medieval Italian and Spanish are found *gabare* and

⁶ Studies of the *gab* in medieval French literature have tended to focus on *Le Pèlerinage de Charlemagne* (a.k.a. *Le Voyage de Charlemagne à Jérusalem et à Constantinople*). For a full review of scholarship, see Grigsby 2000. An important cautionary note on Grigsby's central thesis is sounded in Burgess 2002. Elsewhere in medieval Europe, it has been the more extroverted flyting scene that has attracted attention; for general and Germanic examples, see Parks 1990, for a narrower study of Irish material, Sayers 1997.

⁷ Although the transfer here proposed would have occurred at an early date, our best appreciation of the cultural environment into which it would have been received is based on the somewhat later Old High German *Hildebrandslied*. On flyting and related in this poem, see Bax 2002, Classen 1995, Gotzmann 2003, Harmat 2002, Schwartz 2005, and Tyler 1992.

gabarse 'to boast'. Most relevant to present purposes, Norman French *gaber* was introduced into post-Conquest Britain.

Like the *OED*, the *Middle English Dictionary* distinguishes two basic significations for *gabben*: 'to lie, tell lies, practice deceit', and 'to speak mockingly or derisively, scoff, jeer; to mock, ridicule, treat with scorn; *refl.* reproach oneself; talk nonsense'. Both these meanings inform Norman *gaber* (summarized in the *Anglo-Norman Dictionary* as 'to deceive, trick' and 'to mock, sneer, deride'). A comparable distinction is also seen in Old English, where the adjective *gaf* 'base, vile, lewd' is at some distance from the noun *gaf* 'buffoonery, idle talk'.⁸ These complementary shadings appear to go back to early Germanic. A boast could be interpreted as a likely untenable promise, then seen as either vain self-promotion or intentional deception of others. There was then a complex of Old English, Anglo-French, and possibly Anglo-Norse forms that were synthesized in Middle English *gabben*.

Aside from its carry-over in adaptations of French works such as *Aucassin et Nicolette*, Middle English *gabben* usually carries a condemnatory affect and occurs almost exclusively in a homiletic context, as if the day of *Miles Gloriosus* were long past, as the following words from the medieval treaty *Ancrene Wisse* illustrate: 'þe seste is loquacite; þe fedeð þis hwelþ þe is of muche speche, 3elpeð, demedeð oþre, liheð oðerhwile, gabbeð, upbreideð, chideð, fikeleð, stureð lahtre' (Tolkien and Ker 1962: 52b). Even in the mouth of Chaucer's characters, it has a censorious, sententious tone: 'I nam nat lief to gabbe; Sey what thow wolt, I shal it neuere telle To child ne wyf' ('The Miller's Tale' in *The Canterbury Tales*, Benson 1986, A.3510).

While there is no reason to posit any substratum influence on English from Old Brittonic, the Celtic language met by the invading Anglo-Saxons, adstratum effects were possible, first from Welsh and then in a later age from Irish via Scots Gaelic and Scots. Such influence is, however, not apparent in Middle and early modern English *gab* in the sense of mockery or deceit but rather in such meanings as 'prattle' and 'mouth'. *Gob*, *gop* 'beak, mouth' is found in Irish and *gob* in Scots Gaelic,

⁸ Old English *gaffetung*, if derived from the adjectival use of *gaf*, could be read literally as 'base speech' or, if a compound noun, as 'mockery'; for the latter understanding, see diPaolo-Healey *Dictionary of Old English* 2007-, s.v. *gaf*.

and reflexes later appear in Scots and English (northern dialects and slang) in the sense of 'mouth' from the late sixteenth century onwards (Quin *Dictionary of the Irish Language* 1912–76, Dwelly *Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary*: 2001, *Dictionary of the Scots Language* 2004, *OED* 1989). Amusingly, although this cannot count as evidence for the initial loan here discussed, *gob* is found in the celebrated flyting in Scots between Hume and Montgomerie from 1585.⁹ From a century later is our first attestation of *gob* as 'talk, conversation, language'.¹⁰ We also note the expression 'the gift of the gob'. For many readers this phrase is better known as 'the gift of the gab', representing one more instance of the cross fertilization of these and related terms in various languages of the North Sea zone, starting centuries earlier from a matrix in the honor-dominated societies of the Rhineland.

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⁹ Patrick Hume of Polwarth, 'Misly kyt! and thou flyt, Ile dryt in thy gob', in *The Flyting with Montgomerie* (Cranstoun 1887: 754).

¹⁰ A further indication of the complexity of this word cluster is the presence in modern English of the slang term *gaff* 'vociferation, outcry; stuff and nonsense', and the phrase 'blow the gaff' = 'reveal a secret'.

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