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

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 urwies ‘scamp etc.’
is attested there, too, which presumably results from a contamination of urwiś id. with obwiesz ‘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. urwipołeć ‘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]) ~ dalij ~ 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 auditive ly 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 ~ č > German tsch, e.g. Polish Częstochowa > German Tschenstochau, Polish Bogucice [-uci-] (a district of Katowice) > German Bogutschütz. Interestingly enough, Polish cz was sometimes rendered sch in German, as in Polish Czechowice > German Schuchowitz, 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 [śe-] (Silesia) whose German equivalent is Schieroth, with German sch- for Polish ś- and German roth ‘red’.