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CUMBRIA: THE LAND AND LANGUAGE

All scholars of English as a foreign language must be well aware of the great diversity between the written and spoken word. Years of careful study and perseverance should undoubtedly lead to an excellent command of vocabulary and grammar, but when the scholar turns traveller and visits various parts of the United Kingdom, he is often utterly bewildered by what he hears if the native speakers he encounters do not speak what is generally accepted in the text books as Standard English. The fact is, that the phonetic systems so carefully illustrated in the language books, do not reflect the English spoken by the majority which comprises a whole range of local accents and dialects stretching from the southern coasts and plains to the northern Highlands and far isles. Most Italians who have studied for a few years can probably distinguish between an Englishman's Standard Received Pronunciation and the Standard English pronounced by an Irishman or Scot, but few will have heard of Liverpudlian, Geordie, Glaswegian or Cumbrian which are only four of the numerous dialects spoken.

In 1981 I carried out a survey on 84 first year students of English, at the School of Modern Languages of Trieste University, coming from all regions of Italy. The students were asked many questions regarding their perception of the British Isles and were required to name 5 dialects. Out of a total of 420 possible replies there was only a 39% response despite the fact that 53.6% of the students had studied English from 6 - 9 years and 81% had visited the British Isles at least once.

From the resulting data 60.4% of the correct replies were concerned with the English spoken in Scotland, Wales and Ireland. But clearly there was confusion as regards the differences between regional dialects and Gaelic which in Britain is considered a separate language. From the results it was apparent that the most well known dialect is Cockney which constituted 33.5% of the correct replies. The remaining percentage resulted from only three other dialects: Midlands, Cornish and Yorkshire.

This shows that the students and I imagine most other Italians are not concerned or even aware of the existence of the many varieties of spoken English. This is obvious enough as the majority of Italians who required a knowledge of English for their work use the written language and are not concerned with the spoken word unless they travel far and wide.

It is in this short paper that I have chosen to discuss Cumbria, little known beyond the British Isles, in the hope of generating some interest and the wish to visit the area and learn a little about its culture and heritage.

Cumbria is the north western corner of England, better known as the Lake District. It is a land of great natural beauty noted for its rocky rugged uplands, forested valleys, abundant streams, and 64 lakes, carved out by rain, frost, wind and ancient glaciers. The Lake District has not the vastness nor height of the Italian Alps (the highest peak is Scafell which reaches 1,037 m.) but the colours and scenic grandeur are unique and have been rendered immortal by many famous poets. These include William Wordsworth, himself a Cumbrian, Thomas Grey, Hartley Coleridge and Alfred Tennyson.

In Britain the Lake District is not only renowned for its remarkable variety of landscapes which make up a large portion of a National Park, but also for its sheep farming, scattered mining and quarrying activities.

Cumbrian is the dialect spoken by the local people which resembles English only in written form. Cumbrian speech has a very particular pronunciation and most of the recognizable English words are abbreviated or altered. Furthermore there exist numerous words not used in Standard English which make it an extremely difficult dialect to follow. In fact although in modern Cumbrian most of the words are English, many are of Norse origin, not found in most other dialects. In order to understand a little about this difference one must go back through time.

When the Romans invaded England in 55 B.C. they were repulsed by the native Celtic inhabitants. The following year Julius Caesar returned and obtained a precarious footing, but gradually gained hold south of the river Thames. Thereafter over many decades Roman sway was established in the low lying areas and along the main routeways of England. As the Romans pushed further inland the various Celtic tribes reacted differently. The Belgae in the south around present day London and Brigantes of the north from the area stretching across the country from the Northumberland coast to Lancashire tended to ally, whereas the Iceni of present day Essex fought them. Other Celtic tribes who refused to accept Roman control moved north and westwards to seek refuge in the remoter highland areas of Wales, Cumbria and Scotland, where Celtic strongholds already existed. These areas were of little interest to the Roman colonizers being unsuitable for settlement and thus largely by-passed.

Like the Cymri of Wales and the Picts of Scotland, the Cumbri of Cumberland never totally accepted Roman rule. Due to the constant Celtic raids of northern Roman outposts the Roman Emperor Hadrian built a wall in 122-130 A.D. across northern England from coast to coast. The wall and its defensive works were aimed at keeping the warring Picts to the north and the tribes of Cumbria under control. Despite occasional trade with the Romans there is little archaeological evidence in Cumbria to suggest Roman occupation and thus the Roman culture and language had far less influence in Lakeland compared to other parts of the country.

When the Roman Empire disintegrated and the last Romans left in about 410 A.D., there followed a period of invasions by tribes from Continental Europe. These tribes came mainly from the low-lying areas

such as the Saxons from present day northern Germany, the Angles and Jutes from Denmark and Frisians from Holland. They tended to settle in distinct groups in those coastal areas nearest and most similar to their homelands, but in time, they pushed inland and merged through intermarriage with the native Celts.

These tribesmen brought a new language to the British Isles called Teutonic (or Germanic). They spoke very similar Teutonic dialects which eventually, produced the beginnings of many of the Modern English dialects. Jute settlement in Kent laid down the basis of Kentish. The Saxons who settled in central, east England divided into the east, west or south Saxons who developed the dialects spoken in present day Essex and Sussex and the region once part of the ancient Kingdom of Wessex. The Angles settled even further north and formed the kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria and influenced northern speech.

As mentioned above, these tribes spoke Teutonic dialects so similar in structure and sound, that the language which emerged after several decades has become known in the literature as Anglo-Saxon (or Old English) with slight regional variations. Old English survived, flourished and evolved into what is considered Middle English by the Norman Conquest of 1066 and later Modern English from the 1500's.

In the remoter upland regions the people maintained their original Celtic languages and had little contact with the lowland newcomers. Therefore the language of Cumbria retained its Celtic individuality well on until the late ninth and tenth centuries. At this point in history a change took place which was brought about by a new series of invasions by the Vikings, fierce warriors and sailors from Scandinavia. The Norsemen began to raid along the coasts of Europe for plunder from the Isle of Man to the Orkneys and from Normandy as far away as Constantinople. These attacks continued for many years until small groups began to settle. Most settlement was along the rocky shores of the north west British Isles and the higher underpopulated slopes so similar to the fiords and mountains of Norway. In Cumbria these Viking settlers of self-reliant and independent character gradually intermarried with the local Celtic people and due to their polygamy soon spread throughout Lakeland. It was not unusual only a few years ago when large families were still the norm in the countryside, to find a mixture of children in one household, some being tall, fair and big-boned of Norse extraction and others short, dark and curly haired of Celtic stock. Cumbria therefore slowly became Norse and being allied to Scotland developed separately from the rest of England. Indeed Cumbria was not included in the first Norman Domesday Survey of 1089 and it was not until a considerable time later in the 1200's that it was included in the English administrative system of Norman counties derived from the Saxon shires. Thus the western part of Cumbria became the county of Cumberland, the eastern became Westmorland and the southern districts of Furness and Cartmel became part of the county of Lancaster. This arrangement lasted for 700 years until 1974 when the area became one

large county named Cumbria. Despite the adoption of English administration Cumbria became more Norse than Anglo-Saxon in its traditions and language.

As regards traditions, the currency adopted was the Norwegian *ora* (one *ora* was equivalent to an old halfpenny). Convenient and customary payments for various legal matters and fines in courts appeared to be odd amounts if compared with the rest of the country. They were simply the English equivalent to the old local *ora* currency. Other Norse traditions have survived in sport such as Cumbrian wrestling, hound trailing and fell running.

The Norse influence can be found in Cumbrian place names. Of course there are places where the ancient Celtic is evident such as Helvellyn or those names including *pen* "summit" or "hill" such as Penrith or Penruddock, "Red Hill", "Beacon Hill". But a large number of place names are Norse. The Norsemen settled in the upland valleys which they called *dalr*, they cut forests to create clearings or *thwaites* to farm the land. Thus on the map there are hundreds of dales and thwaites such as Longdale, Risedale, Rydal, Yewdale and Braithwaite. Some clearings took the name of the family or a person such as Tilburthwaite, Beanthwaite (Bjorn) or Ackenthwaite. Others took the name of plants or crops, Haverthwaite "clearing for oats", Thistlethwaite and Thornthwaite.

Once the Vikings had cleared the dales and established their land they raised and reared sheep as in their native homeland. In the warmer summer months they drove their flocks upward to give them a change of pasture to clearings known as *saeter*. To this day there are places called Satterthwaite.

Several other Norse words are to be found on the map such as *ness* "far point", "spur" (Furness District, Bowness), *gill* "a small valley", "ravine", or "cleft" (Gaitsgill), *beck* "swift rivulet" (Beck Side), *garth* "yard", "immediate area surrounding a house" (Grass Garth), *yeat* "gate" (Wateryeat, Heathwaite Yeat), *tarn* "small lake" from the Norse word for tear-drop (Blea Tarn), *fell* "hilly land" (Scafell) and *ey* "island" (Walney).

The Norse which was adopted in every day speech, although altered through time has not died out completely. One story has it that in 1939 a young fisherman from Flookburgh who joined the Navy and was sent as coastguard to Iceland had no trouble conversing with the coastal people there using his home dialect.

The Old Norse which was introduced to Lakeland did not drastically change the grammar and syntax of the original Celtic tongue but rather greatly enriched the vocabulary, some of which over the centuries found its way into Middle English and later Modern Standard English and has been adopted throughout Britain. For example *sk* indicates the Norse origin of many modern words such as *bask*, *scale*, *ski*, *skill*, *skin*, *skit*, *skitter*, *skittish*, *skive*, *sky*. Guttural *c/g* is often an indication of Norse origin as in *ankle*, *beaker*, *cake*, *dike*, *egg*, *game*, *gang*, *garth*, *gasp*, *gate*, *gawk*, *gear*, *get*, *gild*, *girdle*, *girth*, *glee*, *leg*, *nap*, *keel*, *keg*, *kettle*, *kick*, *kid*, *kilt*, *kin*, *kindle*, *token*. The *ei* sound spelt in different ways is Norse and

common in northern dialects as well as in Modern Standard English. For example *aye*, *main*, *nay*, *gainsay*, *say*. Other words known to be of Norse origin are *hit*, *knap*, *knife*, *knoll*, *slant*, *slaughter*, *sleight*, *slight*, *sling*, *slit*, *slot*, *smith*, *snub*, *though*, *thrall*, *thrust*, *tidings*, *till*.

In many cases Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse terms survived side by side and together with French, Latin and Greek additions have led to the development of a great wealth of synonyms in current usage. Some examples of these Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse words which have remained are *rear/raise*, *from/fro*, *craft/skill*, *hide/skin*, *sick/ill*, *shirt/skirt*.

Later, as the Anglo-Saxon influence spread to the whole of the British Isles, the Old English grammar became absorbed into local speech including that of Cumbria. It is only in the remoter Highlands and Islands that Celtic Gaelic has survived.

As the Cumbrian dialect absorbed new Anglo-Saxon words it also began to conform with the rest of England in its syntax. Such changes included the introduction of elaborate strong and weak declensions for both nouns and adjectives. Verbs were used in the indicative, subjunctive, imperative and two simple tenses for past and present with strong and weak conjugations resembling modern German.

The Norse language of Cumbria likewise had an influence on Anglo-Saxon and led to three main grammatical changes. Firstly the gradual loss of grammatical gender, secondly the use of the *s* ending of the third person singular in the simple present tense and lastly the adoption of the pronouns *they*, *their*, *them*.

Written Cumbrian today seems very similar in structure to Modern English and most words would be easily recognized by the average Englishman if read. A few examples are *anudder* "another", *bin* "been", *cwd* "could", *dreavv* "drive", *dacent* "decent", *it ha* "it has", *nivver* "never", *nout* "nothing", *rooad* "road", *sewer* "sure", *sooa* "so", *soorat* "sort", *summat* "something", *thowte* "thought", *wark* "work", *whaar* "where", *varra* "very".

However the reader would inevitably come across numerous words of Gaelic or Norse origin completely incomprehensible to anyone outside Lakeland. Examples of Old Norse are, *blaan* "blow", *brant* "steep", *clarty* "dirty", *dure* "door", *fella* "fellow", *gang* "go", *keck* "to tip", *ken* "to know someone", *ket* "rubbish", *knaa* "to know something", *knoppy* "rough", "uneven", *kysty* "fastidious" (of children), *kytle* "jacket", *laik* "to play", *lug* "ear", *muck* "dirt", *neef* "fist", *ship-pon* "sheep pen", *slape* "slippery", *stee* "ladder". Gaelic examples are *barn* "youngster", "child", *brat* "apron", *broc* "badger", *broo* "hill-slope", *chimla* "chimney", *dunnoch* "hedge-sparrow", *hog* "year old sheep", *mug* "ugly face", *noddy* "simpleton", *ya* "one".

Thus in conclusion the Cumbrian dialect spoken today has become very similar to English in structure and will probably become more so due to the influence of nationwide television. But it is in sound that it still remains a unique dialect as distinct and colourful as the land in which it is spoken.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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