ECHOES FROM THE LAND OF UTCH

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"'Ich woll', 'Er sholl', and by-talk similar"[1]
(Hardy, 1978, p. 342)

At the back of a recently published ground-breaking pronunciation guide to the work of the Dorset dialect poet William Barnes (1801-1886) we find inserted a map of Dorset and its borders with Barnes's native Vale of Blackmore in the middle, a little to the west of which is shown the Somerset town of Yeovil. A little to the west again is a small area straddling the north-flowing River Parrett and referred to as "the Land of Utch for I" (Burton, 2010). The explanation for such a strange appellation is that within this area *utch* and related forms were still being used in Barnes's day for the first-person singular personal pronoun. As *OED* informs us, Old English *ic* was in the midlands and south early palatalized to *ich*, and in the south-western dialects survived as *utch* and variants until the eighteenth or early nineteenth century (Simpson and Weiner, 1989 vii, p. 590).

Pursuing the matter in *EDD* under the headword *ch* for "I", we find that this, along with uncontracted forms such as *ich*, *utch*, *utchy*, was obsolete or obsolescent in the late nineteenth century in Wexford, Dorset, and Devon. We do find that in 1863 Barnes himself recorded *ich* and *uch* "in some of the lower parts of Dorset", though, interestingly, Wright adds that these forms were "not known to our correspondents [in the county]" (1970 i, 552). One such correspondent for Dorset was in fact Thomas Hardy, who in a note published in 1889 refers to *ich* "and kindred words … still used by old people in north-west Dorset and Somerset". Hardy continues: "I heard 'Ich' only last Sunday, but it is dying rapidly. I know nobody under seventy who speaks so, and those above it use the form only in their impulsive moments." (Wertheimer, 1974, p. 26) By "north-west Dorset and Somerset" Hardy presumably means that part of Dorset and adjacent parts of Somerset, in effect the area around the south-west Somerset town of Crewkerne, which abuts to the north on the Land of Utch.

Having now reached Somerset and the borders of the Land of Utch, we note that it was the dialectologist Alexander Ellis who invented this designation for the area covered by the villages of East Coker, East Chinnock, Mid and West Chinnock, Merriott, Chiselborough, Montacute, Martock, Norton, South Petherton and possibly Kingsbury [Episcopi], in all of which, in 1880 when he was conducting his surveys, *utch* was still alive and well (Ellis, 1889 v, p. 84; Wright, 1970 i, p. 552; Burton, 2010, p. 30). . About the same time, in 1877, the Somerset philologist F. T. Elworthy had reported that in two or three villages close to Hamdon Hill and thus within Ellis's 'Land of Utch' the use of *utch* for "I" was still common, as in *Uuch un uum-l goa* for "I and he will go". Some twenty years later, in 1897, reviewing the situation in the same area, he stated that, though surviving in the locality, *utch* was now "worn down to a mere faint *ch*" (Wright, 1970 i, p. 552). Even so, we note that in a book on Somerset life published as late as 1924, W. G. W. Watson has a chapter entitled "The Mer't Man" in which he claims that in the village of Merriott, which is on the western edge of our Land of Utch, the inhabitants differ from those of the surrounding villages in appearance, customs and, not least, in speech. Here one of the main distinguishing features is, he asserts, the use of *uch*, of which two or three examples are given.[2] "It is questionable whether the ancient word 'ich' or 'uch'

can be heard in any other part of England today," he says, and continues: "I am afraid it has nearly disappeared from Merriott by this time." (Watson, 1924, pp. 98-106)

In view of all this, it comes as something of a surprise to find Martyn Wakelin reporting in his *English Dialects: An Introduction* that *ich* was recorded in 1952 during a pilot survey for the Survey of English Dialects, though only at Merriott, where it occurred two or three times on tape in a fieldworker's conversation with a farmer who was only in his forties. Wakelin suggests that Merriott *us* may also be a reduced form of *utch*, and not the first-person plural pronoun (Wakelin, 1977, pp. 112 and 165).

The hypothesis that this *us* is derived from *utch* is supported by a turn of phrase used by a Merriott lady, aged eighty-nine when recorded by me in 1967, who would say when reproved by neighbours for alleged laxity of speech: "Us don't care how you zay it." This informant, Mrs Bessie Osborne, who was born at Crewkerne, two miles south of Merriott, just beyond the confines of Ellis's Land of Utch, but had spent all her married life at Merriott, was full of reminiscences about *utch'm* and *hem*, forms used for "I am" and "he" respectively. Her late husband, a Merriott man, would for instance say, "Bess, utch'm gwain down zo var's the ground, an' if thee hasn't a mind to come thee ca'st bide 'ome," which translates as: "Bess, I'm going down as far as the field, and if you haven't a mind to come you can stay at home."

Mrs Emma Chant, a Merriott-born and -bred neighbour of Mrs Osborne's in the sheltered accommodation where they were both living, was likewise quite familiar with *utch* and its variant *utchy*. Like Mrs Osborne, she also used an *us* possibly identical with the Merriott *us* mentioned by Wakelin when she for instance said: "Us cussed her aaver. Don't her think her's gwain to play be I," which was glossed as "I swore at her. She needn't think she's going to get the better of me," and in which we note, incidentally, the emphatic objective form of the first-person pronoun at the end, along with other interesting pronominal features that cannot be treated here. Then we have the use of full-blown *utchy* in a "limerick" recited by Mrs Chant:

> There was a wol hawker to Merr'ott
> Zaid, "Today utchy hawk round
> Perrott[3]. In me cart utchy zit
> An' hold vaas to me whip,
> An' holler out 'Tiddies an' inins!'"

("There was an old hawker in Merriott, [who] said: 'Today I'll be hawking around Perrott. In my cart I sit and hold fast to my whip, and shout out "Potatoes and onions!"'")

The same informant summed up the situation at the time of recording as follows: "Never hear nobody say *utch*. They wouldn't know what it was, the children … [The old people] know what it is, but they never hardly say it." Or, as Mrs Osborne put it in more general terms: "Lot o' people do'n understand you. You got to tell 'em twice, you see, what you mean, do'n ee? But they be interésted in you, to know what you be zayin' o'." (Smith, 1975, pp. 122-24)

So what were these ladies "zayin' o'' when I interviewed them? Well, here are a couple of samples of what they had to say about nicknames in the village, and how people might come by them. Where there was much intermarriage, leading to the prevalence of just a few surnames, and where Old and New Testaments provided

only a limited number of suitable Christian names, nicknames were more than just an expression of playfulness and a kind of membership badge; they were a necessity.

> And my big boy once, he went down to the tent when they had a meeting there, and in a thunderstorm he got wet through. He come outside, you know, and one of the neighbours had 'en in to dry the tunic what he had. He comed outside and comed on home, and they called him *Wetty Dry*. Mean to say, he'd been wet and they dried him again. And they call him *Wetty Dry* to this moment, and now he's sixty-seven!

And here is another of Mrs Osborne's reminiscences about names and nicknames: My father-in-law, he was in the Territorials at Taunton, and he come home one Sunday morning on a horse. And they said, 'Look-see[4] wol' ["old"] Jobie Sojer going down Broadway on horseback.' And as the children comed on they used to call 'em all *sojers*. And my husband was called *Sammy Sojer*, and if anybody wanted me and they'd say, "Go and tell Bessie Osborne I want her," they wouldn't know who 'twas. But if they'd say, "Tell *Bess Sojer* I want her," they'd know who they'd mean (Smith, 1973, pp. 13-14).

Apart from nicknames for individuals and families, there were traditional taunts directed at whole communities and their representatives, at football matches for instance. Examples mentioned by my informants were *Donkey Broth* and *Bloater Heads*. *Bloater Heads* I have been unable to locate. Whatever the story behind it – and this again seems to have been lost – the epithet *Donkey Broth* was used, very effectively, to wind up the players and supporters of the Shepton Beauchamp football team (Patten, 26.05.2011). As recently as the late 1940s and early 1950s, writes my Merriott informant David Gibbs, who as a teenager played football for Merriott at that time, the lads from Shepton Beauchamp "were considered coarser and more ready to fight than Merriott lads, and that was saying something! Some Merriott people (both sexes) were very hardy in years gone by, and definitely quick to respond to the slightest provocation. Shepton folk were even worse, apparently, to the point of being feared not just in Merriott but also in other villages."

Returning then to the subject of nicknames used to differentiate between families and individuals, David remarks that his father's lifelong friend, William Osborne (1895-1941), was known as *Billy Utchem* (Gibbs, 23.05.-05.06.2011). This can hardly have been for any reason other than a habit of using *utch'm* for 'I am'.

NOTES

1. This is from no. 498, "The Pity of It", published April 1915. Hardy equates Wessex *ich* with German *ich* for 'I', and Wessex *er* with German *er* for "he". The deceptive similarity between the last two misled not only Hardy, but also other West Country writers. See for instance Read, 1914, p. 187, *ur* and, for an overview, Smith 2003, 261-82.

2. E.g. p. 102: "How smart they looked going to church 'a-Sunday', their dames in snow-white curtain bonnets and wide-skirted black dresses. 'No skimpy fool dress for uch,' a Merriott woman would have said.' p. 103: "A 'Mer't' man in those days was always good at his dish. 'Gi'e uchy a bit o' thik leedle ceake, Garge.'" p. 104: An alleged declaration of love: 'Utch d' lu'the zoo, utch coose naa thee very jaas,' in other words, 'I love you so much, I could gnaw your very jaws.'" And finally, p. 105, a Merriott man being shown, in a Crewkerne shop, a new hook with a flaw that the shop assistant tries to explain away in rather fancy language: "'Utch dunno what you be saying-o, mister, but utch doo know

there's a flaa in the ire.'" The last five words mean: "a flaw in the iron", *ire* being the south-western form of the noun *iron*. Watson's *iver* for this is no doubt a misprint.

3. The reference will be to the nearby villages of North and South Perrott, situated close to the River Parrett, after which they are named.

4. *Look-see* may be compared with *sack-bág*, as in two further sentences I recorded from the same informants: "Her's got a frock on hangs like wol sack-bag," and "Thy turn-ups are hanging like lot o' sack-bags." See Wright, 1970, 3, 655 (11), *looky-see*, and 5, 196 (2), *sack-bag*, of which only one example is given, also from Somerset.

Such "tautologous" compounds deserve further investigation.

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