

– LANGUAGE FEATURE –
slew

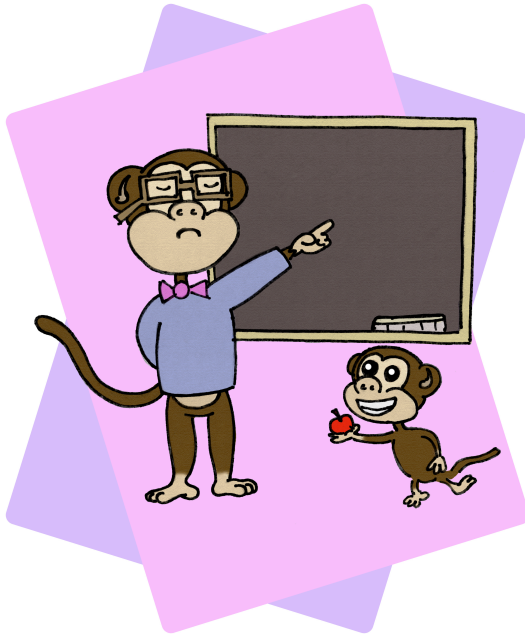
Kevin Conroy

This SLEW of people SLEW that SLEW of people...

What is going on with the different “slews” here? We actually have two unrelated words that just happen to sound the same in Modern English—the verb is of Germanic origin while the noun is a borrowing from Irish (Gaelic) that made its way into American English.

First of all, *slew*, as the past tense form of ‘slay’, likely ultimately derives from the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) root **slak-* ‘to hit, throw’ which

by Grimm’s Law (ie. $k \rightarrow x \rightarrow h$) became **slahanan* ‘to fight, strike, kill’ in Proto-Germanic (OED). In Old English, the infinitive of this verb was *slēan* (apparently *slá(n)* in northern dialects) and it meant ‘to strike, beat, smite, stamp, forge, sting, slay, kill, impact’ (OED). The past tense of the verb was *slóg* /slo:y/ ~ *slóh* /slo:x/ in Old English (and *slógan* in the plural).¹ The vowel of the modern past tense form *slew* /slu:/ has obviously undergone raising. The OED gives a quotation from the *Towneley Plays* that indicates that the older vowel was still used c. 1500 “*I slogh my brother*



this same day”.

Now on to the *slew* of Hibernian origins. *Slew* ‘a very large number of, a great amount of’ is a word that originated in US English, from the speech of Irish immigrants (cf. OED). It is undoubtedly a borrowing from the Irish noun *slua* /sluə/ (*sluagh* in the older orthography) which means

¹ The OED provides a slew of variant spellings from the Old English and Modern English periods.

'host, army; crowd, multitude, throng' and when used with the definite article indicates a general group of people: *an slua* 'the people, the public'. Old Irish had two variant forms, namely, *slúag* /sluəɣ/ and *slóg* /slo:ɣ/ (the latter form being older and pronounced the very much the same as the Old English past tense of 'slay'¹). The reconstructed Proto-Celtic root for this word is **slougo-* (MacBain 1982 sub *sluagh*).² In Welsh the word appears as *llu* /li:/³ and it is even attested in the Gaulish compound name *Catu-slugi* (given in some sources as *Catu-slogi*) 'battle troops' (Vendryes 1974: S-137).

In the Insular Celtic languages, the word for 'household, family' also employs this **slougo-* lexeme as the second member in a compound along with the word for house (Proto-Celtic **tego-*): Old Irish *teglach*, *teglag*; Modern Irish *teaghlach* 'family, household' (it also meant 'household troops' in older forms of Irish) and Modern Welsh *teulu* 'family, household'. Both of these derive from Proto-Celtic **tego-slougos*.⁴ Vendryes relates the Celtic **slougo-* to the Slavonic *sluga* 'a servant' and to Lithuanian *slaugà* 'to serve' and concludes that the original sense of the Celtic word **slougos* was "the group that serves the leader"⁵ (Vendryes 1974: S-137).

In Irish, *slua* refers to animate groups only (typically humans) and the martial meaning 'host, army' seems primary. In English, however, the meaning *slew* has been extended and non-human referents are possible—for example, 'Should I ask a slew of questions just to draw his gaze my way?' (OED). The earliest reference of this word in the OED is from 1839, in D. P. Thompson's *Green Mountain Boys*: 'He has cut out a road, and drawn up a whole slew of cannon clean to the top of Mount Defiance.' This meaning of *slew* not restricted to American English, but examples also exist in Hiberno-English (meaning 'multitude, host, army' as well as 'gang of youngsters' in an extended meaning), for example: 'mercilessly cutting down slews of Turks who had escaped annihilation in the first onset' in Seumus MacManus' *Bold Blades of Donegal* (Ó Muirithe 2000: 180).

Finally, Gaelic *sluagh* also features in another familiar English word—*slogan*. This word derives from Irish/Scottish Gaelic *sluagh-ghairm* 'host-cry' and was originally used in English to describe of battle cries of the Gaels of Scotland or Ireland (OED). According to the early examples given in the OED, it is clear that this word was first borrowed from Scottish Gaelic, although it was also employed to describe Irish war cries.

So there you have it. *Slew* 'killed' and *slew* 'a great multitude' are not connected etymologically, coming from unrelated Germanic and Celtic words respectively. There is some irony in the sense that Irish *slua* generally has martial reference (which is not so in the case of the English loan-word) and that it just happens that the form of the English loan words sounds identical to the past tense of the English verb *slay* as

² **slougo-* is not related to the PIE root **slak*, but the Irish verb (which no longer used in the spoken language) *sligh* 'to cut, fell; cut down, slay' likely is, as well as is *sleacht* 'to cut down, fell, slaughter' and possibly the noun *slacht* 'polish, good appearance, tidiness' (cf. Vendryes 1974: S-124, S-133).

³ The cluster #sl regularly gives #ll /l/ in Welsh.

⁴ Intervocally, in compound, /sl/ becomes /hl/ (and then /l/) in Irish. Similarly, <l> /l/ becomes <ɫ> /l/ in Welsh in the compound form because of an initial consonant mutation known as lenition. The change of /slo:ɣ/ to /læx/ also features shortening and obscuring of the vowel in addition to devoicing final /ɣ/ in ultimate position (in an unstressed syllable).

⁵ 'Le sens d'origine du mot celtique est donc «l'emsemble de ceux qui servent le chef»'

well as the fact that Old English *slóg* 'slew, killed' and Old Irish *slóg* 'host, army; crowd, multitude' were likely pronounced very much the same as are the two types of *slew* in Modern English.

WORKS CITED

- MacBain, Alexander. (1896). *An etymological dictionary of the Gaelic language*. Stirling. (2nd ed., 1911. Inbhir Nis; reprint 1982, Glasgow).
- Ó Muirthe, Diarmaid. (2000). *A dictionary of Anglo-Irish – words and phrases from Gaelic in the English of Ireland*. Dublin: Four Courts Press.
- Simpson, J. A. agus Weiner, E. S. C. (1991). *The Oxford English dictionary*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press. www.oed.com
- Vendryes, Josph. (1974). *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien: R,S*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.