

What Surname Distribution Can't Tell Us

Peter Christian

Synopsis

In the February 1997 issue of *Family Tree Magazine*, (Vol. 13, No. 4), Geoffrey Hodgson argues in "Surname History: A New Technique" that the distributional overlap of the surname Hodgson in the IGI (International genealogical Index) with the area of Viking settlement of North West England proves that the surname Hodgson was derived from the Norse forename Odd. In this response,¹ I argue that such a hypothesis can only be based on ignoring both the reasons for the accepted etymology (son of Hodge, a nickname for Roger) and the evidence against Viking origins. I show how the Viking hypothesis is incompatible with some of the fundamental principles of surname etymology.

Although cast as a refutation, the present article can be understood without knowledge of Mr Hodgson's, and aims to elucidate, on the basis of this single example, some of the methods and principles of historical linguistics in general and surname etymology in particular. More specifically, it demonstrates why 16th century and later distributions cannot be used to refute linguistically sound etymologies.

Linguists should note that because this piece was intended for a non-specialist audience it does not employ the standard linguistic conventions for the presentation of sounds, and does not make the terminological distinctions that would be expected in a scholarly publication.

Introduction

The question of the origin of a surname is really two distinct questions: where, geographically, did the name originate and how, linguistically, did it arise? Of course these are related, often very closely, and both require consideration of a combination of geographical and linguistic factors, but there is clearly a difference between looking at the distribution of early attestations and explaining the linguistic processes by which a name came into being.

The Linguists' Shortcomings

In the February 1997 issue of *Family Tree Magazine*, Geoffrey Hodgson, in an article based on his book *The Hodgson Surname*, bemoans the domination of the study of surname origins by linguists and etymologists, and welcomes the IGI as a tool which allows what he describes as "supplementary research based on locational distribution".²

As an example of the possibilities opened up by this, he attempts to demonstrate that the accepted etymology of his surname is wrong, and that distributional evidence from parish registers, coupled with pre-Conquest settlement evidence, shows it to be of Scandinavian origin. He castigates P. H. Reaney, author of the standard surname dictionary, and other

¹ A shortened version was published in the June 1997 issue of *Family Tree Magazine* (Vol. 13, No 8). This version is © 2001 Peter Christian. Geoffrey Hodgson's reply to the present article will be found at <www.hodgson-clan.net/a-dissenting-view.htm>.

² Geoffrey M. Hodgson, "Surname History: a new technique", *FTM* Vol. 13 no. 4 (Feb. 1997), and *The Hodgson Surname. Its Norse Origins and Cumbrian Location*, Martlet Books, 1993.

linguists for suppressing earlier suggestions of Scandinavian origin.³ Indeed, the subtext of Mr Hodgson's article is that the time has come for the genealogist to take over the business of surname study from the etymologists. In his the book, the formulation is even stronger, and he seems to be attacking the professional competence of Reaney and others.⁴

Two Hypotheses

The modern view is that Hodgson is derived from Hodge, a nickname for Roger, which itself was originally introduced into this country by the Normans.⁵ Mr Hodgson's thesis is that his surname is derived from the Norse personal name Odd or one of its forms, introduced to North West England in the 10th century by Norwegian settlers and subsequently transformed into Hodgson via the patronymic Oddson. For Mr Hodgson, the "decisive" evidence is a coincidence between the distribution of the Hodgson surname in Northern England in the earliest parish registers (as shown by the IGI) and the area occupied by Norwegian settlers in the 10th Century.

There's no doubt that Mr Hodgson's map is interesting, but to call it decisive is surely an overstatement. The overlap between Norwegian settlement and Hodgson distribution cannot be seen as a *correlation* without further evidence, particularly given that they are 600 or more years apart. On the other hand, if Mr Hodgson could show that there were several indisputably Norwegian names and no name of other origin with the same distribution, then the case would be much stronger. But even a cursory glance at reference works raises some questions about the value map itself: I've no doubt it is accurate for the period of parish registers, but earlier distribution includes some other areas: Black's cites Hodgsons in Ayr and Lanark in the 15th Century;⁶ McKinley's book on Lancashire surnames quotes two Hodgsons in Crosby, well to the south of Mr Hodgson's map, in 1346;⁷ Lower's dictionary refers to a Hodgson family from 15th Century Northumberland.⁸

Evidence Ignored

But even if we accept Mr Hodgson's claim about the match of Hodgson distribution and Norwegian settlement, there would still be a very substantial reservation about the Oddson theory — it is based on ignoring all the evidence for the contrary view. Given that this represents a consensus, any hypothesis which cannot refute or offer an alternative explanation for that evidence, must be regarded as very weak.

Mr Hodgson's sole argument against any other hypothesis, e.g. of Anglo-Saxon or Norman origin, is based on the fact that his distribution patterns do not match known settlement

³ Mr Hodgson overplays the support for this in earlier works, which do not derive Hodgson from Oddson. In any case, because their etymologies are speculative rather than based on linguistic knowledge, earlier 19th century works, such as Lower's and Ferguson's, are now completely worthless, except where they cite original source material.

⁴ *Hodgson Surname*, p.12.

⁵ P.H.Reaney, *A Dictionary of English Surnames*, London 1958.

⁶ Black, *Surnames of Scotland*, New York 1946.

⁷ Richard McKinley, *The Surnames of Lancashire*, London 1981.

⁸ Mark A. Lower, *Patronymica Britannica*, London 1860.

patterns of these groups. This is a rather odd argument in both cases. For the Saxons, it implies that *any* Saxon-derived surname must be distributed throughout the area occupied by the Saxons.

In any case, this seems to be a misunderstanding: Mr Hodgson seems to have taken Reaney's point that there is an Anglo-Saxon equivalent of Roger to mean there is the possibility of an Anglo-Saxon etymology. But the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of Roger is Hrothgar and this could not develop into Hodge(son). And to talk of "Norman" origin is also misleading: the theory is that the *ultimate* source of the *Hodge* component is Norman, not that Hodge or Hodgson are actually Norman names.

The only real distributional issue here is the distribution of the forename Roger, for Hodge could arise, and therefore so could Hodgson, in any area where the name Roger was in use. Bardsley quotes an example from the 1379 Yorkshire Poll Tax, where one servant refers to her master as Roger, while another refers to him as Hodge.⁹ Reaney cites an example of the surname Hodge in Cumberland in 1212. Clearly, both the forename and surname Hodge were in use in Northern England in the medieval period. And the Cumbrian example shows there is no difficulty whatsoever in supposing that Cumbrian Hodgsons are derived from Cumbrian Hodges. Finally, McKinley's Crosby Hodgesons are both called Roger, which at least suggests the possibility that these might show a patronymic rather than surname use of Hodgson.

The Case for the Accepted Etymology

The case for the accepted etymology of Hodgson is in fact quite overwhelming, and consists of three key points, all of which can be easily established from standard reference works.

1. The name Hodge is well attested as a nickname for Roger. In addition to Bardsley's example, mentioned above, there is another very well known 14th Century example: in the Cook's Prologue in the *Canterbury Tales*, the Cook calls himself Hodge, but is addressed by the Host, a few lines later, as Roger.¹⁰
2. There's no doubt that Hodge has a puzzling feature too, if it's a form of Roger: the "h" at the beginning. But in fact, as the OED points out in its entry on *hodge*, this is a feature of a number of nicknames. Richard, Robert and Roger all have associated rhyming nicknames starting with both "h" and "d": Dick, Hick, Hob, Dob, Hodge, Dodge.
3. Probably every common English male forename has given rise to an identical surname and to derivatives with *-s* and *-son*. This also applies to nicknames derived from them. Richard, for example provides the surnames Richard, Richards, Richardson, Dick, Dicks, Dixon, Hick, Hicks, Hickson and others. Roger is no exception: alongside Roger, we find Rogers, Rogerson, Hodge, Hodges, Dodgson etc. In fact for Hodge, there are a number of others: Hodgkins, Hodgkinson, Hodgekiss, Hodgett. So either Mr Hodgson must argue that Hodge and Hodgson are quite unrelated, or he needs to show that Hodge, too, and all its derivatives match his distribution map. If the former, then he needs to explain how, of all these related forenames, Hodge alone manages to avoid having a form with *-son* derived from it.

⁹ Charles Bardsley, *A Dictionary of English and Welsh Surnames*, London 1901, entry for *Hodge*.

¹⁰ This example is quoted by Reaney and the OED.

It is not clear from his article or his book which of these views he takes, but neither is obviously more plausible than the other.

	Forename	Patronymic -s	Patronymic -son	Diminutives with -in or -kin
Name in R-	Richard	Richards	Richardson	
Nickname D-	Dick	Dicks	Dickson, Dixon	Dickin
Nickname in H-	Hick	Hicks	Hickson	Hickin
Name in R-	Robert	Roberts	Robertson	
Nickname D-	Dobb	Dobbs	Dobson	Dobbin, Dobkin
Nickname in H-	Hobb	Hobbs	Hobson	Hopkin
Name in R-	Roger	Rogers	Rogerson	
Nickname D-	Dodge	Dodges	Dodgson	Dodgen
Nickname in H-	Hodge	Hodges	Hodgson	Hodgen, Hodgkin

Table 1: Some nicknames and surnames derived from forenames beginning with R.

Can Hodgson, uniquely of all these surnames, be of Viking origin?

Linguistic developments

Finally, given that Mr Hodgson is trying to establish an *etymology* for his surname, it is very unfortunate that he pays so little attention to the crucial linguistic step in his argument. No one will dispute the Norwegian settlement of Cumbria, the introduction of the forename Odd, or the existence of a patronymic Oddson. But Mr Hodgson's argument in fact depends entirely on the question of whether Oddson could and would have developed into Hodgson. If so, then his other arguments and the counter-evidence will have to be weighed up; if not, then any remaining evidence is entirely irrelevant — the argument must fail.

Mr Hodgson seems to regard this as entirely unproblematic and opines that it might happen "partly through shift and homogenisation of the local dialects". But this shows complete ignorance of what is involved in etymology. To establish the derivation of one word or name from another, it is necessary to *demonstrate precisely* how each sound in the later word-form corresponds to the sounds in the earlier, and if sounds change, precisely how this is in accord with known changes in the language at the time. It is no different, in some respects, from proving a genealogy: the idea that A looks like B and they must therefore be related is as patently ridiculous to the genealogist as Mr Hodgson's suggestion is to the historical linguist. The difference is that in linguistic history we have much more evidence to decide the issue, since it depends on the entire language and not just a small number of documents. The absence of this sort of linguistic proof is not just a blemish in the case for the Oddson hypothesis, but a fatal flaw.

Admittedly, the necessity for this sort of proof may well not be obvious to non-specialists, because etymological dictionaries tend not to discuss such details. This is partly for reasons of space, and partly because these details will be of little interest for most general readers, while being unnecessary for specialists. But in fact, every entry in a modern etymological dictionary of surnames is based on a background of detailed knowledge about how sounds developed in the history of the English language. It is also based, incidentally, on

knowledge of how to interpret surname spellings in medieval documents.

Damning Evidence

But it's not just that Mr Hodgson fails to examine the linguistic evidence, the problem is that the evidence, when examined, is damning — I think it is fair to say that, linguistically, the development of Oddson into Hodgson is not just improbable but quite impossible.

One of the fundamental findings of historical linguistics is that sounds don't just change at random in individual words, they change in regular ways in whole groups of words at about the same time. And it is simply not the case that "d" changed to "dg" in medieval English, either in general, or in some specific set of circumstances.¹¹ The most obvious proof of this is that the adjective *odd*, which is related to the forename Odd, is not pronounced *hodge* in Modern English or any dialect of it.¹² Modern words with "dg" either developed this from "g" in a much earlier period (before the earliest Anglo-Saxon documents), or owe it to their French origin.

Another striking objection, arising from evidence Mr Hodgson himself cites, is that Odeson and Odson are both recorded in the 1379 Poll Tax for Yorkshire. But there is also a Hodgeson in that tax assessment¹³, and there are the earlier attestations of Hodgson in Lancs cited by McKinley. But if Oddson is supposed already to have changed to Hodgson by 1379, what are these Oddsons doing? The fact is that the "d" in a name such as Oddson simply *could not* have changed in this way in this period, and the co-existence of Oddson and Hodgson in the same source is good documentary evidence of the fact that it did not. Less decisive, but also needing proof are the initial "h" and the "e" in the middle — unless it can be proved how these came to be added to the name, there is no possibility of derivation from Oddson.¹⁴

Compare this with the standard view. Because of the initial "h", it is not obvious at first sight that Hodge is derived from Roger, but comparison with other forenames shows a regular (even if unusual) pattern, which, coupled with the documentary evidence, is unarguable.

So, on the one hand, then, we have a theory, based on a single, unproven assumption about distribution, which gives rise to an insoluble linguistic objection and cannot explain the contrary evidence. On the other we have a theory which explains the origin and the form not just of a single name but of a whole group of names, a theory which is consistent with all the evidence, and whose only failing, it seems, is that it cannot "explain" Mr Hodgson's map. But since it is not in any way inconsistent with the map, that cannot be an objection.

¹¹ See, for example, Joseph Wright, *English Dialect Grammar*, Oxford 1905, §296ff.; Roger Lass in *The Cambridge History of the English language, Vol. II 1066-1476*, ed. Norman Blake, Cambridge 1992, pp. 57-67.

¹² See Wright.

¹³ Mentioned in Bardsley's entry for *Hodge*.

¹⁴ An additional "h" is sometimes found, variably, in the spelling of words and names from French. This happens because a French-derived "h" is not pronounced and it is therefore sometimes mistakenly added in writing where it does not belong. This cannot apply to Oddson.

General Principles

The Oddson hypothesis fails not because it merely happens to be unproven or one or two specific pieces of evidence have been overlooked, but because it depends on violating a number of general principles of surname etymology:

- **The central sources for English surname origins are post-Conquest medieval records**, not parish registers, or general historical records of earlier settlement. Distribution evidence based on parish registers can suggest very strongly where a surname originated in earlier centuries, but cannot, of itself, explain why it originated where it did. In this instance, evidence of Hodge as a nickname and surname in medieval records is more conclusive than any earlier or later evidence.
- **The derivation of one name from another requires detailed linguistic explanation** of how the earlier form developed into the later in accordance with known linguistic developments of the period. Anything else is just speculation. There's no doubt that this is the main problem for amateur etymologists without any linguistic background — there's simply no way to do this without looking at the specialist literature, and having the knowledge of how to apply what you find. The history of etymology is littered with proposed connections that looked plausible *until* someone tried to work out the detail. The general principles for proving such connections are well established and uncontroversial; the main sound changes in English are well documented. If you choose to ignore all this, then you are not establishing the origin of a surname, you are simply mythologizing your ancestry. Before the development of historical linguistics in the 19th century, this was frequently the purpose of etymology — as when the medieval chroniclers sought to give Britain an illustrious origin by deriving *Britain* from *Brutus* — but it has no place in modern surname studies.
- **Looking at individual words or names in isolation does not lead to reliable results.** Even surnames do not develop in isolation, particularly if they are patronymics or have many related forms. In this instance, looking in detail at the other Roger-derivatives, and even other forenames and nicknames, would have provided a broader perspective and would have highlighted some of the problems in claiming a unique and separate origin for one of them.

Conclusion

The accepted etymology of Hodgson is "apparently unanimous and impregnable" for very good reasons: it is founded on:

- a set of well-tested principles and methods
- knowledge of language change, and
- detailed documentary and linguistic evidence drawn from the period in which the surname originated.

In the absence of these, no amount of circumstantial evidence from earlier or later periods can make the case for a surname origin.

Of course, the IGI remains an excellent tool for the study of surname distribution and spread, and Mr Hodgson is right to emphasize its usefulness for that purpose. The evidence collected from it by genealogists cannot be anything but beneficial in the study of surnames.

But this is not a substitute for the traditional collection and linguistic scrutiny of evidence from medieval records. Nothing we discover about *distribution* post-1538 can change the fact

that the *linguistic derivation* of one name from another can only be established or challenged by examining the earliest available evidence in the light what we know about the history of English and of English surnames.